

Agenda Item 8.

ITEM NO:

TITLE	Overview & Scrutiny – Ideas for Improvement
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee on 31 May 2016
WARD	None Specific
DIRECTOR	Andrew Moulton, Head of Governance and Improvement Services

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 across the Borough.

RECOMMENDATION

The Committee is requested to:

- 1) consider the proposed ideas for improving the Overview and Scrutiny process, set out in the report;
- 2) agree which of the proposed actions it wishes to adopt.

SUMMARY OF REPORT

The Council has a well-established Overview and Scrutiny process, delivered by the Management Committee and the three Overview and Scrutiny Committees. As Council resources become ever 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 to the existing Overview and Scrutiny process. 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 monitored and reported back to Members. These ideas for improvement are set out in the report for Members to consider. Any ideas supported by Members will be included in an action plan for implementation and review at subsequent meetings.

Background

Overview and Scrutiny at Wokingham Borough Council has been operating for over ten years. 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.

Agenda Setting

Overview and Scrutiny Committee Agendas are typically very full with a wide range of issues to consider. It is important, therefore, that the Agendas are focussed on key issues and make effective use of the meeting time available. Some Councils use a form of Agenda setting 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 Chairman can identify any Key Lines of Enquiry which could benefit from further information and research before the meeting. Agenda setting could take the form of a face to face meeting between the Chairman and Officers or a conference call. Chairmen may also wish to use pre-meetings for Committee members when complex issues are to be discussed.

Proposed Action – Democratic Services team to programme Agenda setting sessions into Overview and Scrutiny Chairmen’s diaries.

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.

Proposed Action – Report contents, recommendations and scheduling to be considered at the proposed Agenda setting sessions.

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.

Proposed Action – Calls for Evidence to be introduced for Overview and Scrutiny Task and Finish Groups.

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.

Proposed Action – Discussions with the Council's Web team about the prominence and content of Overview and Scrutiny web pages.

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.

Proposed Action – Democratic Services team to work with the Council's Communications team to provide more frequent/varied Overview and Scrutiny information for dissemination via Social Media.

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. It is suggested that the development of an Overview and Scrutiny page in Wokingham Borough News be discussed with the Council's Communications team. This 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.

Proposed Action – Democratic Services team to discuss the development of an Overview and Scrutiny page in Wokingham Borough News with the Council's Communications team.

Monitoring of Public Questions to the Executive and Full Council

Members of the public regularly ask questions at meetings of the Executive and full Council. These questions indicate areas of public interest and concern and may generate ideas for Overview and Scrutiny investigation. It is suggested that details of public questions and the answers given are reported to the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee for consideration and potential inclusion in the Overview and Scrutiny work programme.

Proposed Action – Regular monitoring report to the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee on questions submitted to the Executive and Council.

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.

Proposed Action – Six monthly report to the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee tracking recommendations made by Overview and Scrutiny Committees and task and Finish Groups, and subsequent actions and outcomes.

Evaluation of Task and Finish Groups

Overview and Scrutiny Task and Finish Groups have carried out excellent work and made recommendations to improve service delivery and policy development. In order to strengthen the process it is suggested that each group carry out a self-evaluation at the end of its review. This would identify elements that went well and identify learning points to inform and improve the scoping of future reviews. As an example, the evaluation could review the level of public engagement in the review and the input from expert witnesses.

Proposed Action – Final meeting of Task and Finish Groups to include a self-evaluation item which will provide feedback to the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee, thereby supporting continuous improvement.

Next Steps

Following Member discussion, any ideas which are supported will be included in an action plan and implemented. Progress on delivering the action plan will then be reported to the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee at subsequent meetings. More effective data collection and progress monitoring will improve the annual reporting process in future years.

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	
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	0	0	

Other financial information relevant to the Recommendation/Decision

None

Cross-Council Implications (how does this decision impact on other Council services, including properties and priorities?)

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

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Date 20 May 2016	Version No. 1

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