

# **DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES Scrutiny Inquiry PROJECT PLAN**

*Agreed:*

*Established by the Performance and Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee*

Version 2  
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## **1. Introduction**

This scrutiny working group was established by the Performance and Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 10 December 2021 to review the support for democratic processes at Oxfordshire County Council. Members of the Committee wanted to review, in particular, plans being developed to improve support to elected members in carrying out their roles, including the engagement of elected councillors in the decision-making process.

This review also includes specific consideration of the Overview and Scrutiny functions at Oxfordshire, with ambitions for making Overview and Scrutiny a model of best practice, as well as looking at how Overview and Scrutiny Committees might be able to better contribute as a vehicle for hearing the voice and concerns of the public in the decision-making processes of the Council and its strategic community partners.

## **2. Membership of the Scrutiny Commission Inquiry**

It is suggested six non-executive members. A politically proportionate breakdown equates to:

- 2 Conservative/Independent
- 2 Labour
- 2 Liberal Democrat/Green

## **3. Area for Review**

To review the key elements of support for democratic processes at Oxfordshire County Council.

## **4. Aims and Objectives**

To review the key elements of support for democratic processes at Oxfordshire County Council, with particular regard to:

- (a) how the Council plans to best support elected members so that they can more effectively fulfil their roles
- (b) how the Council plans to ensure those elected to represent the people of Oxfordshire are engaged in effective decision-making
- (c) how the Council plans to make Overview and Scrutiny at the Council an example of best practice
- (d) how the Council plans to support Overview and Scrutiny at the Council in better representing the voice and concerns of the public.

## Out of Scope

This inquiry will not consider personnel resource issues (which are deemed operational). It will be mindful not to duplicate the work of the constitutional working group, but make itself aware of this work.

### **5. Possible Outcomes for the Inquiry**

A scrutiny report and Scrutiny recommendations to Cabinet, to be submitted for endorsement to the Performance and Corporate Services Scrutiny Committee.

### **6. Stakeholders**

#### **Portfolio Holder(s):**

Councillor Glynis Phillips - Cabinet Member for Corporate Services

#### **Other Councillors:**

Scrutiny Chairs and vice Chairs  
Cabinet members  
Political Group leaders  
Councillors elected at the most recent election

#### **Corporate Directors**

Claire Taylor – Corporate Director of CODR  
Other Corporate Directors to be involved in questionnaires

#### **Other Officers:**

Anita Bradley, Director of Law and Governance

Simon Harper, Head of Governance

Alastair Read, Head of IT

Susannah Wintersgill - Director: Communications, Strategy and Insight

Kerry Middleton - Head of communications, marketing and engagement;

Carole Stow – Engagement Consultation Manager.

#### **External Partner Stakeholders:**

- Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS)
- Institute for Local Government (INLOGOV)

- Other councils.

## 7. Evidence

### 7.1 Documentary Evidence and Reports

Evidence should include oral and documentary evidence from a range of stakeholders and include an examination of best practice nationally.

#### Reports:

The inquiry will receive commissioned reports from Council officers, including:

#### *Report 1 – Introduction* (Simon Harper and Claire Taylor)

A report to scope the key elements of support for democratic processes at Oxfordshire County Council. To cover:

- Introducing the Council's activity since adopting the strategic priority to 'play its part in a vibrant and participatory democracy'
- Reporting on the planned actions and KPIs to support this strategic priority over the coming year
- The corporate context: budget challenges, organisational structure – who does what, any interactions between support for democratic processes and other Council policies

#### *Report 2 – Administrative and Operational Support* (Simon Harper and Claire Taylor)

A report to outline the current administrative and operational support to elected members so that they can more effectively fulfil their roles. To cover:

- Democratic Services
- IT support for members: hardware provision, ongoing support and training, software needs (including case management)
- The role of officers and the role of political groups in providing support and an exploration of whether political assistants would improve bridging any gap

#### *Report 3 – Member Engagement* (Simon Harper)

A report to set out how the Council currently enables member engagement in effective decision-making. To cover:

- An outline of the member induction process and a review of the lessons learnt from the new-member questionnaire
- Member training and development
- Key methods of communications between members and officers
- Rules over member access to information

#### *Report 4 – Improving Overview and Scrutiny* (Tom Hudson and Simon Harper)

A report to explore how to make Overview and Scrutiny at the Council an example of best practice. To cover:

- A review of the results of the CfGS self-assessment tool
- Scrutiny Team Plan
- Examples of best practice from other councils

*Report 5 – Representing the Concerns of the Public* (Susannah Wintersgill, Simon Harper and Tom Hudson)

A report to set how the council engages with the public in the decision making process and specifically, plans to support Overview and Scrutiny in better representing the voice and concerns of the public. To cover:

- Outline of the Council's Consultation and Engagement Strategy
- Plan for communicating Scrutiny and the Council's media protocol
- Existing measures for how Scrutiny involves the public

#### Questionnaires:

The inquiry will seek to collect and use information gathered from questionnaires relating to:

- New member induction experience
- The performance of Scrutiny using the CfGS self-assessment (all Scrutiny, Cabinet and SLT members)

It is expected that where appropriate the outcomes of this will be followed up with interviews with relevant stakeholders.

#### 7.2 Oral Evidence / Expert presenters

##### ***First Evidence Session***

Councillor Glynis Phillips - Cabinet Member for Corporate Services  
Claire Taylor, Corporate Director CODR  
Simon Harper, Head of Governance

##### ***Second Evidence Session***

Councillor Glynis Phillips - Cabinet Member for Corporate Services  
Political group leaders  
Claire Taylor, Corporate Director CODR  
Alastair Read, Head of IT  
Simon Harper, Head of Governance

##### ***Third Evidence Session***

Councillor Glynis Phillips - Cabinet Member for Corporate Services  
Anita Bradley, Director of Law and Governance  
Simon Harper, Head of Governance

### ***Fourth Evidence Session***

Tom Hudson, Principal Scrutiny Officer  
Simon Harper, Head of Governance

Subject to cost/availability:

- CfGS
- INLOGOV
- Other councils

### ***Fifth Evidence Session***

Susannah Wintersgill, Director: Communications, Strategy and Insight  
Kerry Middleton, Head of Communications, Marketing and Engagement  
Carole Stow, Engagement Consultation Manager  
Simon Harper, Head of Governance  
Tom Hudson, Principal Scrutiny Officer

### **7.3 Site Visits.**

Site visits to other councils to look at alternate practice are possible.

## **8. Key Lines of Enquiry**

- Key strategic questions to be answered during the scrutiny review. (link to terms of reference), Eg:

- Q What are the key elements of support for democratic processes at Oxfordshire County Council?
- Q How does the Council support elected members so that they can more effectively fulfil their roles? How might this be further improved?
- Q How does the Council ensure elected councillors are engaged in effective decision-making? How might this be further improved?
- Q How could the Council make Overview and Scrutiny at the Council an example of best practice? In what ways might Overview and Scrutiny be further improved?
- Q How could the Council support Overview and Scrutiny as a vehicle to better represent the voice and concerns of the public?

## **9. Equalities Implications**

Equalities Implications will be considered in conjunction with the protected characteristics in the Equalities Act 2010.

## **10. Budgetary and Resource Implications**

The setting up of a working group, and its operation, does not involve any direct costs. Clearly the outcomes of any recommendations ultimately by such a Group may do so but these would be referenced in a further report to the Committee at that time.

## **11. Publicity & Communications**

This is primarily an internally-focused review, meaning communications and publicity will also be internally focused.

## **12. Risks**

The following potential risks to the Scrutiny Commission Inquiry have been identified:

- ▶ Time overrun- failure to deliver timely report
- ▶ Lack of availability of key players over consultation period
- ▶ Scope creep – failure to restrict investigations to terms of reference
- ▶ Lack of stakeholder buy-in.



### 13. Timetable

<b>Key Stage</b>	<b>Start Date</b>	<b>Finish Date</b>	<b>Completed?</b>
1. <i>Proposal to establish a Scrutiny Review Panel</i>		10 <sup>th</sup> December 2021	✓
2. <i>Scrutiny Inquiry Proposal &amp; TOR drafted</i>		10 <sup>th</sup> December 2021	✓
3. <i>Draft TOR discussed with department</i>			✓
4. <i>Membership and TOR agreed by the Scrutiny committee</i>		10 <sup>th</sup> December 2021 (P&CSOSC)	✓
5. <i>Scrutiny Inquiry Project Plan drafted</i>			✓
6. <i>Chair/ Vice Chair elected by the Scrutiny Review Panel</i>			✓
7. <i>Informal meeting of the Scrutiny Review Panel</i>		22 <sup>nd</sup> February 2022	✓
8. <i>Refreshed scope agreed by Committee</i>		09 December 2022	
9. <i>Refreshed membership agreed by Committee</i>		19 January 2023	
10. <i>Evidence sessions start/finish</i>	6 February 2023	10 March 2023	
11. <i>Consideration of draft recommendations by the Scrutiny Review Panel (Task Group)</i>		By 17 March 2023	
12. <b>Consideration of draft report and recommendations by the Scrutiny Review Panel</b>		By 31 March 2023	
13. <i>Comments on technical accuracy by the Head(s) of Service/ external agencies</i>		7 April 2023	
14. <b>Date of the Scrutiny Committee to agree the draft report and recommendations/agenda despatch date</b>	20 April 2023 (publication date)	28 April 2023 P&CSOSC OSC	
15. <b>Date of Cabinet meeting for receipt of Scrutiny report</b>	15 May 2023	<b>23 May 2023</b>	
16. <i>Cabinet response to Scrutiny recommendations</i>	12 June 2023	20 June 2023	
17. <i>Presentation of the Executive Response to Scrutiny Committee /despatch date</i>		14 July 2023	

**14. Schedule of Meetings (All TBC when membership is agreed)**

Date of Meeting	Purpose of Meeting	Documentary Evidence/reports	Witnesses/inc officers
<p><b>TBC</b> <b>Private Meeting</b></p>	<p>Election of the chair and vice chair.</p>		<p>Members of the Scrutiny Working Group Only.</p>
<p><b>TBC</b> <b>Private Meeting</b></p>	<p>To understand the key elements of support for democratic processes  To undertake a deeper dive into the administrative and operational support available to members and identify areas where this may be improved</p>	<p>Report 1 – Introduction  Report 2 – Administrative and Operational Support</p>	<p>Councillor Glynis Phillips - Cabinet Member for Corporate Services Political group leaders Claire Taylor, Corporate Director CODR Alastair Read, Head of IT Simon Harper, Head of Governance</p>
<p><b>TBC</b> <b>Private Meeting</b></p>	<p>To understand how the Council currently enables member engagement in effective decision-making and identify areas where this may be improved.</p>	<p>Report 3 – Member engagement in effective decision-making</p>	<p>Councillor Glynis Phillips - Cabinet Member for Corporate Services Anita Bradley, Director of Law and Governance Simon Harper, Head of Governance</p>
<p><b>TBC</b> <b>Private Meeting</b></p>	<p>A report to explore how to make Overview and Scrutiny at the Council an example of best practice.</p>	<p>Report 4 – Improving Scrutiny</p>	<p>Tom Hudson, Principal Scrutiny Officer Simon Harper, Head of Governance  Subject to cost/availability: - CfGS</p>

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- INLOGOV</li> <li>- Other councils</li> </ul>
<p><b>TBC</b> <b>Private Meeting</b></p>	Public engagement in the decision making process.	Report 5 – Public Engagement	<p>Susannah Wintersgill, Director: Communications, Strategy and Insight  Kerry Middleton, Head of Communications, Marketing and Engagement  Carole Stow, Engagement Consultation Manager  Simon Harper, Head of Governance  Tom Hudson, Principal Scrutiny Officer</p>
<p><b>TBC</b> <b>Private Meeting</b></p>	To consider draft recommendations		Members of the Working Group only