

Task Group and Rapid Scrutiny Exercise meetings

Purpose

1. To propose changes to the Overview and Scrutiny (OS) Task Group and Rapid Scrutiny Protocols, clarifying arrangements regarding meeting locations.

Background

2. Much of the OS function's work is undertaken by task groups and rapid scrutiny exercises, commissioned by the four select committees to review issues in depth. Task groups and rapid scrutiny exercises offer a more flexible approach than formal committees and are an effective arena for looking at evidence in detail and drawing informed conclusions.
3. Guidance for members on the operation of these groups is set out in the Task Group and Rapid Scrutiny Exercise Protocols ("the Protocols"), attached at **Appendices 1 and 2** respectively (with proposed additions in red). The relevant Protocol is noted by members at the first meeting of each new activity.
4. Following the Covid-19 pandemic, the council implemented online meeting technology to allow council business to be transacted while adhering to social distancing restrictions. Temporary legislation was enacted to permit formal committee meetings to take place remotely, although this expired in May 2021. Since then, OS committee meetings have been in-person while task groups and rapid scrutiny exercises have remained online.

Main considerations

5. With the removal of social distancing restrictions, the full reopening of council hubs and hybrid technology becoming available in some meeting rooms, it is timely for OS to consider its approach to task group and rapid scrutiny meetings. Under Part 2 of the Constitution, OS Management Committee holds the remit for "developing appropriate OS operational protocols" and is therefore invited to consider appropriate changes to the Protocols, offering members guidance on this matter. It is important to have some consistency of approach in order that members understand the likely commitments involved in participating in an OS exercise before signing up to do so.

6. Following discussion with the chairmen of the other three select committees, and informal feedback from other active OS members, the Chairman of OS Management proposes that task groups and rapid scrutiny meetings should, in general, meet online except where there are particular reasons why a face-to-face element would enhance the exercise. This is for the following reasons:
 - To protect broad member participation in OS, by making it accessible regardless of the member's location, ability to travel or wider commitments
 - To minimise unnecessary travel time, transport costs and the council's carbon footprint, in keeping with its aspiration for net carbon neutrality
 - To support speed and efficiency when scheduling and attending meetings, particularly when many attendees are required.
7. It is recognised, however, that sometimes there will be benefits to having a fully face-to-face meeting or the option of in-person attendance using hybrid meeting technology. This may be where participating members have not previously met (such as at an exercise's first meeting), to suit the needs of witnesses or participants with particular needs, or where the group agrees that the topic would be better addressed in person (such as where it is of a sensitive nature).
8. It is also important that for each exercise all participating members have the opportunity to express their preferred approach, with the chairman making the final decision in light of that discussion, following advice from the Scrutiny Officer and having reviewed the relevant Protocol.
9. It is therefore proposed that the following section be added to the Protocols, as set out in the versions appended. For the avoidance of doubt, OS Panels, which are effectively OS task groups commissioned by external bodies, would also follow this approach but in consultation with the commissioning body.
 1. *"In most cases, task group meetings will be held online in the interests of efficiency, accessibility and minimising travel costs and the council's carbon footprint. For the same reasons, all task group meetings should include the **option** of remote attendance wherever possible.*
 2. *When considering the location, format and timing of their meetings, task groups may want to consider the following factors:*
 - *The availability and preference of all attendees*
 - *The availability of a suitable meeting room*
 - *The particular matters to be discussed and needs of witnesses*
 - *Efficiency of time, carbon footprint and transport costs."*
10. To allow OS to learn from and amend its approach through experience (including of new meeting hybrid technology), it is suggested that this be

reviewed in 6 months' time with findings reported to the Committee by the OS Chairman.

Proposal

11. To amend the Task Group and Rapid Scrutiny Protocols as set out under paragraph 10 and in the versions appended.

12. For the Chairman of OS Management Committee to conduct a review of the adopted approach in 6 months, with findings brought back to Committee.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 Amended Task Group Protocol – May 2022

Appendix 2 Amended Rapid Scrutiny Exercise Protocol – May 2022