

Overview & Scrutiny

Task Group Protocol

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Introduction

What is the Task Group Protocol?

1. The Task Group Protocol offers guidance on the function and operation of scrutiny task groups at Wiltshire Council. The Protocol is not intended as an exhaustive list of instructions, but offers general principles on how task groups can be most effective.
2. The Council's Constitution formally sets out the powers of the overview and scrutiny function and should therefore be referred to in conjunction with this document where necessary.

What are scrutiny task groups?

3. Scrutiny task groups are small working groups of non-executive members. They are established by overview and scrutiny committees to review specific issues and service areas and submit recommendations to the executive on how they could be improved. The committee agrees the task group's terms of reference, membership and arrangements for reporting back to the committee. Task groups can undertake a monitoring role by ensuring that an existing service or project is performing to expectations, but they can also play a key role in developing local policy.

First principles

4. Task groups should follow the principles set out in the Constitution, which fosters and encourages an approach to overview and scrutiny that is:
 - Inclusive
 - Structured
 - Non-adversarial
 - Reliant on evidence rather than anecdote
 - Cross-party
5. Task group members should aim to take a positive and constructive approach, engage in developing policy where possible, be mindful of agreed priorities in the Council's Business Plan and ensure that the needs of the customer is the focus of any review.

How do scrutiny task groups work?

6. Task group meetings tend to be less formal than those of committees and enable a more extended dialogue with officers and cabinet members. They also

allow close engagement with external agencies and witnesses, which can provide a balanced and informed perspective by placing the issue or service in a wider context. Task Group meetings are an effective arena for looking at evidence in detail and therefore arriving at informed findings and recommendations. Task groups can operate flexibly, taking any approach they consider necessary to inform their deliberations, including:

- Meeting with members and officers
- Meeting with external agencies, interest groups and service users
- Considering existing evidence e.g. performance reports
- Gathering new evidence e.g. through surveys, site visits or research
- Undertaking or commissioning analysis
- Visiting relevant sites or organisations
- Learning from other local authorities and areas

The role of members

7. Task groups are member-led. Members set the meeting agendas and the work programme and own any findings and recommendations presented in the final report. Crucial to a task group's effectiveness is the relationship between the scrutiny function and the executive, including the nature of the personal contact between leading individuals of the two. Those assisting or giving evidence should be treated with respect and courtesy.
8. Task group chairmen have a key role to play in ensuring that the exercise leads to a valuable outcome. As well as chairing the meetings and ensuring that all members are clear about their purpose, the chairman acts as the overall lead for the review, reporting back to the committee on the task group's work and taking a leading role in shaping its final report.

The role of officers

9. The scrutiny officer's role is to provide project support for the task group. This includes advising on the process, undertaking research and analysis and helping to produce the task group's final report.
10. Other officers will be invited to attend task group meetings as witnesses on the basis of their experience of, and involvement in, the issues being considered. These will usually be first and second tier officers, but on occasion there may also be benefits in talking to 'front-line' staff to gain a detailed insight into an area of service delivery. This should be done in agreement with the relevant director.

External advisors and co-optees

11. External advisers can provide task groups with expert knowledge and an independent perspective on the area under review. Their role can include:

- Helping the panel to identify appropriate officers and witnesses
- Assisting the panel in developing lines of enquiry
- Commenting on the evidence presented
- Contributing to member training
- Providing advice regarding the final report

Scrutiny officers will be able to advise on the sourcing of external advisors.

12. Co-optees sit alongside other members of the task group and are able to hear evidence, ask questions and contribute to the findings. They are appointed because of their specialist knowledge and/or expertise. Co-optees do not have voting rights.

Scoping

13. The task group's first meeting is an opportunity to 'scope' the review and can be crucial in laying the foundations for an effective scrutiny exercise. It should be used to agree the following:

- Chairman - elected by the task group from its membership
- Terms of reference - changes must be ratified by committee
- Scoping - what are members hoping to achieve?
what evidence is needed?
how will it be obtained?
setting a timescale helps to keep the activity focused

Task group meetings

Meeting protocol

14. Prior to the task group meeting, witnesses should be advised of the issue to be considered and what will be required of them. The scrutiny officer should ensure that witnesses (particularly those from outside of the Council) understand overview and scrutiny's powers and processes and provide them with a copy of the Task Group Protocol.

15. Witnesses should also be advised whether notes of the meeting will be available and whether they will have the opportunity to view or comment on the task group's final report before it is published. The task group may need to

make a judgement on the confidentiality of any evidence provided on advice from the Solicitor to the Council.

16. Witnesses are asked to present their evidence in a clear, concise and jargon-free manner.

Public or closed meetings

17. To ensure a full and frank discussion of the issues and evidence, task group meetings are not generally open to the public. However, the task group's final report, plus the executive response, are considered in a public forum (except where they contain confidential or exempt information). On occasion, a task group may have a specific reason for holding an open meeting, for example, to enable wider consultation with interested members of the public.

Substitutions

18. No member substitutions are permitted for task groups. Overview and scrutiny committees appoint members to task groups on the basis of their experience, interest and availability, rather than their political affiliation. Additionally, members gain an in-depth understanding of the chosen topic over a series of meetings before reaching conclusions and it would therefore be difficult (and potentially disruptive) for a new member to enter the arena partway through the process.

The final report

19. At the conclusion of its work a task group will prepare a final report clearly setting out its findings and recommendations. This may include whether the task group or committee needs to undertake further work and how the implementation of recommendations should be monitored.
20. It is important that the final report presents the task group's findings and recommendations **with evidence** in a clear and understandable form. The evidence cited should be checked with relevant witnesses to ensure that it is accurate.. Any resource implications arising from the recommendations must be properly costed and should show how they would be funded, following consultation with the Director of Finance. It will normally be prudent to discuss provisional conclusions and recommendations with key witnesses before the report is published.
21. Whenever possible, all members of a task group will unanimously agree the content of its final report. However, if there is not unanimity amongst the task group, members are able to submit a minority report stating clearly, with evidence, why they are unable to agree with the majority view.

22. Witnesses should be informed when the task group's final report is published and provided with a link or electronic copy.
23. The final report is submitted to the appropriate overview and scrutiny committee for endorsement, who then refer it to the relevant executive accountable body for a formal response within 2 months.