

Review of Overview and Scrutiny 2017-21

Purpose

1. To highlight the key pieces of work undertaken by Overview and Scrutiny (OS) during the 2017-21 Council and to recommend topics to the Management Committee for suggested inclusion in a new OS work programme after the elections.
2. To review the approach and effectiveness of OS during the 2017-21 Council and make recommendations for consideration by OS Management Committee after the elections.

Background

3. An opportunity for Overview and Scrutiny (OS) to look back on its activity during the outgoing council is an important part of its learning and improvement journey. The legacy process allows consideration of OS's successes and challenges during the past four years, including the key scrutiny reviews undertaken. It can then submit suggestions for OS under the next council to consider in order to maximise the impact of its activity.
4. For the 2017-21 council, the following process has been conducted:
 - 1) **Feedback from OS members, Executive members and senior officers**

All select committee members invited to suggest work priorities for OS under the next council and suggest improvements to OS's approach. The chairman and vice-chairman of OS Management Committee also met with other select committee chairmen and vice-chairmen, as well as the council's Executive and Corporate Leadership Team and their feedback has been incorporated into some of the recommendations set out below.
 - 2) **Select Committee 'end of term' reports**

The three select committees considered their 'end of term' reports, highlighting the key pieces of work done during the current council and suggesting ongoing pieces of work under the next. These, plus the equivalent information for the Management Committee, are listed in the table under **Appendix A**.
 - 3) **OS Management Committee reviews the work of OS during 201-21**

Having considered the above, this committee is asked to agree an overarching report for submission to the new council to be considered at the next Management Committee's first meeting for the 2021-25 council.

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Context

5. A key milestone for OS during the 2017-21 council was the publication of new statutory guidance on OS at local authorities in England and Wales. This followed a review of OS's effectiveness by the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) parliamentary select committee. The council submitted two responses to this enquiry, setting out Management Committee's views on effective OS practice.
6. In June 2019, OS Management Committee considered the new statutory Guidance and its implications for Wiltshire, concluding that the council was closely aligned with the best practice set out (and also with the recommendations of the MCHLG select committee).
7. From May 2017 to March 2020, OS operated its constituted structure, with four select committees meeting 6-8 times per year typically operating around 3 task groups each plus ad hoc rapid scrutiny exercises and representation on council programme boards. This structure and approach is broadly in line with most of the other large, top-tier councils surveyed in 2020.
8. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, between April and December 2020, OS switched to a streamlined model focusing on COVID-19 through a dedicated task group and OS Management Committee. All other task group and rapid scrutiny activity was suspended, excepting the priority work being undertaken by the Financial Planning and Global Warming & Climate Change task groups. This streamlined approach was agreed in order to protect council resources, allowing officers focus on the urgent operational response to the pandemic. In practice, it involved:
 - a) A reduction in the public OS undertaken;
 - b) Greater use of informal select committee meetings and 'offline' engagement by leading OS members with select committees and the Executive;
 - c) More officer briefings for select committee chairmen and vice-chairmen on forthcoming proposals to Cabinet.
9. Since January 2021, the full select committee structure has been reinstated, with agreement that agendas are focused on COVID-19 and other priority areas, questions are provided in advance where possible and meetings aim to conclude within 2 hours.

OS key activities – 2017-21

10. With Council elections in May, each select committee has produced an "end of term" style report to highlight the good work done and outcomes achieved. These, along with relevant Management Committee activities, are listed in **Appendix A**.

Recommended ongoing OS work – 2021-25

11. Also extracted from the select committees' reports is a list of reviews which they consider should be included as ongoing pieces of work in any new OS work programme. These are shown in **Appendix B** and again include relevant Management Committee responsibilities.

OS's approach 2017-21 and 2021-25

12. Following the discussions outlined under paragraph 4, it is proposed that the following represent the **key strengths** of Wiltshire OS during the 2013-17 council:
 - a) Positive OS-Executive working relationships
 - b) In general, good opportunities to influence policy at an early stage
 - c) An apolitical and collaborative culture
 - d) Focused on the council's key priorities
 - e) An appropriate balance of proactive-reactive OS (with few "call-ins")
 - f) Willingness and support from officers across the council
 - g) Dedicated scrutiny officer resource
 - h) The use of information briefings to inform and educate councillors, as a complement to OS meetings
 - i) Particularly valuable work undertaken by OS task groups
 - j) Positive engagement with a variety of partners
 - k) Efficient and effective engagement on the COVID-19 response when a streamlined OS model was necessary.

13. Following the discussions outlined under paragraph 4, it is proposed that the following represent the **key areas for development** for OS to consider under the 2017-21 council:
 - a) Be more proactive in identifying and pursuing work priorities beyond the Cabinet forward work programme
 - b) Reintroduce regular liaison between OS chairmen/vice-chairmen and their Executive counterparts to support OS work planning
 - c) More regular liaison between all OS chairmen and vice-chairmen, focusing on oversight and continuous improvement
 - d) Give greater profile to financial and corporate scrutiny
 - e) Seek more opportunities to influence policy at an early stage
 - f) Continue to make efficient use of virtual meetings for task groups, rapid scrutiny exercises and briefings etc.
 - g) Continue to aim for committee agendas focused on priority areas, delivering <2-hour meetings where possible
 - h) Undertake more liaison with MPs on local issues with a national component
 - i) Increase public awareness of, and engagement in, OS work
 - j) Make better use of councillors' diverse knowledge and experience
 - k) Maximise the number of non-executive councillors participating in OS, taking the post-election induction as an opportunity to promote OS
 - l) Expand the use of information briefings, taking advantage of remote meeting technology to arrange these flexibly, having discussed the most appropriate topics with Executive, officer and partner colleagues
 - m) Refine the process for OS task groups jointly established by two or more select committees

14. The additional **key development areas** below have been specifically identified by **Children's Select Committee** for consideration by its successor committee:
 - a) Ensure that no issues are missed by implementing a more joined-up approach with other groups such as:

- Corporate Parenting Panel
 - Schools Forum
 - Health Select Committee
 - Safeguarding Vulnerable People Partnership (SVPP)
 - FACT programme boards
 - SEND Local Area Board
 - Wiltshire Council's Health and Wellbeing Board.
- b) For the above to include:
- Liaison between the respective chairmen when a committee agenda is being prepared
 - Annual meetings between the respective chairs when the Committee is setting its priorities for the year ahead
 - Communication with the Chair and Vice-Chair of Schools Forum ahead of the annual budget scrutiny process.
- c) Embed the voices of Wiltshire's children and young people in the work of the committee through:
- Regular updates from the Youth Voice team
 - Direct engagement with the Wiltshire Youth Union (including Children in Care Council (CiCC), Members of the Youth Parliament (MYP's), and Care Leavers Forum) to ensure that the committee is aware of WYU's priorities when the committee is setting its work programme.
- d) Consider joint training and information sessions between the committee and the bodies listed above, to maximise officers' time and strengthen working relationships.
- e) Consider forming small working groups to undertake detailed reviews of the 8+ annual reports received by the committee, with findings reported to committee, and/or for questions on these reports to be invited in advance.

Next Steps

15. Members of the Management Committee are asked to give guidance on what should be included from the attached appendices in the final 2017-21 legacy report to Management Committee under the new Council.
16. Following the elections this will then be made available to the new Management Committee, appointed by Council on 18 May 2021. The Management Committee's first meeting is scheduled for 25 May 2021, when the chairman and vice-chairman will be elected from among the appointed members. Direction will then be given to the select committees when they first meet over the initial development of the new work programme. An element of dialogue will naturally occur between the Management Committee and select committees and through consultation with the executive and partners over the following cycle of meetings before finalising the plan.

Recommendations

17. To thank all those councillors, co-opted members, stakeholders, partner organisations, officers, other witnesses and members of the public who have positively contributed to

the work of the select committees and in the effective delivery of the OS work programme;

18. To acknowledge that the content of the report, including the key activities listed at **Appendix A**, demonstrates the significant contribution that OS is making to open and honest decision-making and to the overall good governance of the authority;
19. To refer the topics listed in **Appendix B**, and the strengths and development areas listed under paragraphs 12-14, for consideration by OS Management Committee at its first meeting of the new Council.

Report authors:

Henry Powell, Democracy Manager (Scrutiny), 01225 718052,
henry.powell@wiltshire.gov.uk

Simon Bennet, Senior Scrutiny Officer

Marie Gondlach, Senior Scrutiny Officer

Appendices

Appendix A OS Key activity and achievements 2013-17

Appendix B Recommended ongoing OS work 2017-21