

REPORT ON THE PROGRESS OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

1 PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 This report has been prepared in response to the decision by the Overview and Scrutiny (O&S) Committee to request a report from Members on the progress of the Committee to date.
- 1.2 In response to the government publication “Statutory Guidance on Overview and Scrutiny in Local and Combined Authorities, published by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government in May 2019¹, Angela Hutchings, Acting Managing Director of Rochford District Council, invited the Centre for Governance and Security (CfGS) to carry out an evaluation of the Council’s scrutiny function, which was completed and outlined in their final report letter to the Council in November 2021.
- 1.3 In response to the recommendations of the CfGS RDC decided to strengthen the working arrangements between the Executive and the Review Committee, towards the creation of an Overview and Scrutiny function with the following objectives:-
 1. To consider a refresh of the Review Committee, terms of reference, structure and functions.
 2. To provide clarity of scrutiny’s purpose.
 3. To engage more fully on policy and key decisions in a challenging and constructive framework.
 4. To engage via triangulation meetings between the Committee Chair, Vice-Chair, Executive Members and officers to consider future issues to the more effective applications of overview and scrutiny to identified issues.
 5. To enable better opportunities to involve scrutiny as an improvement asset.
 6. To seek support to the Committee by providing additional training.
 7. For RDC to develop an Executive-Scrutiny protocol outlining and affirming roles to deal with the practical workings of the Committee’s processes.
 8. Scrutiny of Executive Members to form more a part of the work programme to provide opportunities to hold the Leader and Portfolio Holders to account.
 9. Consideration to be given to presenting an integrated finance and performance report offering opportunities for the Leader to effectively engage with scrutiny and in the process be seen to be accountable in a constructive sense.
 10. To review the Council’s call-in procedures in its constitution to give greater clarity on call-in criteria and purpose and how to get the best out of the relationship with scrutiny.
 11. To create task and finish groups or spotlight events to consider key issues in greater depth.
 12. That more skills and development support is offered to those in the key roles of the Committee Chair, Vice-Chair and Executive Members on their understanding of the scrutiny role.

¹ Statutory Guidance on Overview and Scrutiny in Local and Combined Authorities. Crown copyright 2019 ISBN 978-1-4098-5458-6

13. To encourage Overview and Scrutiny pre-meetings to gain a better understanding of issues prior to debate in Committee.
- 1.4 A main concept of the changes to Overview and Scrutiny, from Review, is to provide more emphasis on shaping policy by the overview function, having more involvement with the core policy and decision-making processes in the main portfolio areas. To bring the Committee in the earlier stages of budget preparations and engagement within the refreshing process of the mid-term financial strategy.

2 COMMITTEE PROGRESS

- 2.1 The Review Committee title was changed in May 2022, to that of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
- 2.2 The RDC Executive in response to the guidance in the government's Overview and Scrutiny guidance, concerning the cross party, non-political, structure of the Committee, appointed a minority group Councillor, Cllr Stuart Wilson, in place as Chairman, with a majority group Councillor, Cllr Jo McPherson, as Vice-Chair. The Committee Members represent in proportion the political divisions of the Council.
- 2.3 Prior to the first Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting on 31 May 2022 the Chairman held a pre-meeting to outline the issues concerning the Council's Economic Growth Strategy 2022 – 2025. This offered Members an insight into the workings of the new Committee. The Economic Growth Strategy workstream is an example of an ongoing strategy offering Members an opportunity to review the current strategy, to place the overview of the ongoing strategy in context and make recommendations. There was an improvement in the briefing of the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Committee and the preparation of Members for the meeting.
- 2.4 In June 2022 RDC arranged online Overview and Scrutiny training for Committee members followed by the first of two face to face training sessions. The second training session has been arranged. The training is of high quality with practical workshop sessions. One of the contributors to this report, Cllr Adrian Eves, was on holiday at the time of the first session of training. Although not in attendance, good reports have been received regarding the quality of training received.
- 2.5 In July 2022 the O&S Committee considered the following issues in the work plan:-

The Treasury Management Annual Review. Members had the benefit of training arranged by RDC in the interpretation of financial statements. Under the now established new working practices Committee members now expect pre-meetings and improved briefings. In the transition from Review to Overview & Scrutiny, the Committee is through this piece of work experiencing a review situation but joining a process with respect to conducting an overview of the ways ahead in such workstreams.

The Committee also looked at the #OneTeam Transformation Programme, the Strategic Partnership with Brentwood Borough Council. Support was given by officers and the Executive in providing background to this item in the work plan. Members had the opportunity to debate concerns and as a full O&S process will have the opportunity later to review the results of the Transformation Programme and evaluate the successes and failures.

The Council's litter strategy was subjected to overview and scrutiny by the Committee who had received the necessary preparation and was enabled to engage fully making useful recommendations. Again, there will be the opportunity to follow through in the full process with a review of the progress and results of the litter strategy next year.

Another issue considered by the Committee was the scrutiny of the Asset Delivery Programme (ADP), an issue which has had some considerable political focus. As such, it was decided that the Committee should engage an independent expert review and scrutiny of the ADP to not only scrutinise the programme but also provide constructive feedback to the Executive, providing a reference for future Council programmes where appropriate.

3 CONCLUSIONS

- 3.1 In responding to the Overview and Scrutiny guidance from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, RDC has taken positive steps to engage with the guidance. RDC has invested in training, working with the Executive and Leader of the Council to put in place a modern cross-party Overview & Scrutiny Committee. The Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Committee have embraced the changes and arranged pre-meetings and engaged in a form of triangulation meetings as outlined in 1.3 point 4 above to achieve better briefing of Committee members. The Committee is gaining experience and experiencing case by case the various facets of the change to the proactive overview and scrutiny process. The restructure has seen a big change in purpose and direction from the former Review Committee. In my view, it is too early to say how effective the changes will be on outcomes, but the general feeling is that the expectation is that the changes are positive. Overall, the consensus is that the changes are a definite improvement over the previous more reactive Review Committee process.