Subject: 2020/21 Annual Work Programme

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Summary
This report reviews progress on the 2019/2020 Overview and Scrutiny Committee (OSC) Work Programme and outlines the process for developing the 2020/21 Work Programme.

Recommendations
(1) To note the progress achieved on the 2019/20 Work Programme
(2) To approve the process to develop the 2020/21 Work Programme and initiate a ‘call for topic ideas’ ahead of the July OSC meeting.

1 Background

1.1 Under the Council’s Constitution the OSC is required:

To approve an annual Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme, including the programme of any Task and Finish Groups appointed so as to ensure that the Committee’s and Task and Finish Groups’ time is effectively and efficiently utilised;

1.2 The requirement to set an annual programme follows best practice in scrutiny work. The Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS), the leading national centre of expertise on governance and scrutiny, advocates that scrutiny committees agree a work programme at the start of the year, so that items can be scheduled for consideration and reports produced in a timely manner. The CfPS concludes:

Effective work planning is the bedrock of an effective scrutiny function. Done well, it can help lay the foundations for targeted, incisive and timely work on issues of local importance, where scrutiny can add value. Done badly, scrutiny can end up wasting time and resources on issues where the impact of any work done is likely to be minimal.
1.3 The annual work programme should take into consideration a number of factors including:

- The four core scrutiny functions: Holding the Executive (Cabinet) to Account, Policy Development and Review, Review of Council Services (Performance Monitoring) and External Scrutiny (of other agencies providing local services);
- The corporate priorities of the Council including the Council Plan and the work plan of the Cabinet;
- The wishes of all committee members including those who are not members of the largest political group on the Council; and
- Best practice in terms of the process for scrutiny work programming.

1.4 Scrutiny best practice recommends that work programmes should be developed based on sound criteria with a clear rationale for topic selection.

1.5 The Statutory Guidance on Overview and Scrutiny in Local Government, published by the Ministry for Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) in 2019, stressed that scrutiny’s role has to be focused, and the scrutiny work programme needs to be carefully prioritised.

2 2019/20 Work Programme

2.1 The 19/20 Work Programme was agreed by the OSC at its meeting on 3 July 2019.

2.2 In advance of the July 2019 meeting, Members were asked to put forward topic ideas, with these topics subsequently scored against the criteria in the ‘PAPER’ mnemonic:

- Public interest: concerns of local people should influence the issues chosen;
- Ability to change: priority should be given to issues that the Committee can realistically influence;
- Performance: priority should be given to areas in which the Council and Partners are not performing well;
- Extent: priority should be given to issues that are relevant to all or a large part of the District;
- Replication: work programme must take account of what else is happening to avoid duplication or wasted effort.

2.3 Progress on delivering the 19/20 Work Programme, as outlined in Appendix 1, has generally been good.

2.4 Alongside the work conducted at the main OSC meeting, two Task & Finish Groups were completed in 2019/20 on the Budget and the Climate Emergency.

2.5 Task & Finish Groups play a vital role in overview and scrutiny. These Groups are established by the Committee to look into a particular issue or problem and report back with recommendations. They are usually made-up of 3 to 4 members.
2.6 In the case of the Climate Emergency Task & Finish Group, the proposals put forward by the Group – and subsequently agreed by the Cabinet – have set the agenda for the new Climate Change Panel and the Council’s emerging work in this area. The Group’s work demonstrates the ability of scrutiny to tackle a complex subject, gather evidence, and develop considered policy proposals.

2.7 Another Task & Finish Group was set up on ‘OSC Policies and Procedures’; however, the first meeting was cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic. It is envisaged that this Group will now hold meetings in the summer with recommendations coming to OSC in the autumn.

2.8 Emerging themes from this Group are likely to focus on the development of pre-decision scrutiny, enhancing OSC’s policy development role, increasing public awareness of and engagement with OSC, and structural changes to the scrutiny function.

2.9 Reflecting on the 19/20 Work Programme, three main challenges can be identified:

1) The number of items included in the Work Programme led to some very long OSC meetings and highlighted the need to prioritise topics;

2) New topics have emerged throughout the year and this has emphasised the need for flexibility within the Work Programme;

3) The Covid-19 pandemic led to the cancellation of all scrutiny activities including the April OSC meeting, meaning that the Work Programme was curtailed early and some items were therefore not covered. The pandemic and social distancing requirements have also now precipitated a shift – at least in the short-term – to online meetings.

3 2020/21 Work Programme

3.1 OSC is setting its work programme in the context of a Covid-19 pandemic that presents an unparalleled challenge to local government generally and Stratford District specifically. It is noted that the District is predicted to face the fourth largest economic impact of all local authorities in the UK. In this environment, an effective and constructive scrutiny function is more important than ever.

3.2 The CfPS has summarised why the continuation of a robust member-led scrutiny function (that is timely, supportive and proportionate) is so important at the current time:

- Substantial decisions will be being made which are likely to have an impact on the lives of residents and the places they live;

- The Council and its partners should be trying to draw on the perspective of as broad as possible a range of people as it responds to the crisis;

- Scrutiny activities do not take senior officers and senior members away from the task in hand – they are the task in hand. Councils are democratic institutions, which is why they are leading the local response. Councillors have a vital role in feeding into and bolstering this response in the communities they serve, and the scrutiny function provides a mechanism for this work to feed into overall strategy.
3.3 In terms of setting the Work Programme, it is recommended that the process follows a similar pattern to 2019/20. Namely, that Committee Members are offered the opportunity to submit ideas for consideration and then the OSC is asked to assess these ideas against the ‘PAPER’ criteria.

3.4 It is also recommended that Cabinet Members and the Senior Management Team are invited to suggest topics. This should ensure synergy between the work of Cabinet/Council and the work of OSC.

3.5 It was envisaged that there would be a greater emphasis this year on engaging residents in the Work Programme, with the opportunity for residents, parish and town councils and local groups to suggest topics for inclusion. This would follow best practice and the Council Plan objective of ‘Putting residents and communities centre stage’.

3.6 To achieve this, a new scrutiny@stratford-dc.gov.uk email was setup and a draft article earmarked for the March edition of ‘Parish & Partners’, with a press campaign also planned. This initiative has been halted by the Covid-19 pandemic; however, it is recommended that this idea is revisited from August with the subsequent results feeding into the work of the OSC in 2021.

3.7 As well as a formal consultation, Members are encouraged to have informal conversations with individuals and groups in their own local areas on what topics they would like to see the Committee tackle. As ever, scrutiny should remain a member-led process with Councillors dictating what topics go on the work programme.

3.8 Members are asked to consider suitable topics following this meeting and ahead of the July OSC, and to complete the ‘Topic Selection Form’ (Appendix 2) and return to the Overview and Scrutiny Support Officer and/or Committee Services. During this ‘call for topic ideas’, both the Chairman of OSC and the Overview and Scrutiny Support Officer will be able to advise Members on the suitability of topics.

3.9 In considering both the choice of topics and the number of topics, Members are encouraged to think carefully about the ‘PAPER’ criteria, the four key functions of OSC, and the challenges identified in paragraph 2.9.

3.10 An outline timetable for the process is as follows:

- June OSC – agree process;
- June to July – Members to put forward ideas and complete a Topic Selection Form (Appendix 2);
- July OSC – consider topic ideas against the PAPER mnemonic and agree the 2020/21 Work Programme;
- August to December – engage residents and parish/town councils to ask for topic ideas;
- January 2021 OSC – full review of progress on the Work Programme and the introduction of any new topics following the public consultation (and the completion of the work of the ‘Policies and Procedures’ Task & Finish Group); and
4 Delivering the Work Programme

4.1 It is anticipated that the Work Programme will be delivered through a combination of committee work and Task & Finish Groups, including:

- Single written committee reports provided by officers and external representatives;
- Question and Answer sessions with internal or external representatives;
- Standing committee agenda items, for example, performance monitoring;
- Scrutiny reviews undertaken by Task & Finish Groups. These can either be:
  - Short reviews, useful for issues requiring swift conclusions and recommendations; or
  - Longer term reviews, featuring multiple meetings over several months, and useful for complex issues in need of detailed analysis.

4.2 Consideration should also be given to any necessary site visits, public/stakeholder consultations, and workshops or evidence-gathering sessions. It may also be possible to dedicate a single meeting of the Committee to a single item or create a distinct ‘Standing Panel’ to keep a watching brief on an important local issue or theme.

5 Updating and Reviewing the Work Programme

5.1 Whilst acknowledging the need and benefits of setting an annual work programme, it is clear that there is a need for flexibility as issues develop throughout the year. This is particularly relevant given the circumstances outlined in paragraphs 3.5 and 3.6 and the (now delayed) ambition to engage residents more fully in the work of the OSC.

5.2 A work programme review in January 2021 will therefore provide the Committee with the opportunity to consider its work ‘in-year’ and take into consideration any emerging issues.

6 Options to the Committee

6.1 The Committee is asked to note the progress on the 2019/20 Work Programme and endorse the approach outlined in Section 3, with a 2020/21 Work Programme to be agreed at the Committee’s July meeting.

7 Evidence Base

7.1 The suggested approach to setting the annual Work Programme follows best practice in scrutiny, and draws evidence from Members and an analysis of the work of the Committee over the last 12 months.

8 Members’ Comments

8.1 Members are asked to comment on the above recommendations.
9 Implications of the proposal

9.1 Legal/Human Rights Implications

9.2 There are no immediate Legal implications arising from this report.

9.3 Financial

9.3.1 There are no immediate Financial implications arising from this report.

9.4 Climate Change

9.4.1 There are no immediate Climate Change implications arising from this report.

9.5 Council Plan

9.5.1 Effective scrutiny underpins all ambitions contained within the Council Plan.

9.6 Analysis of the effects on Equality

9.6.1 There are no immediate Equality implications arising from this report.

9.7 Data Protection

9.7.1 There are no immediate Data Protection implications arising from the report.

10 Risk Assessment

10.1 An effective scrutiny function is at the heart of an effective decision-making system and the overall governance of the Council. A failure to properly plan work would ultimately lead to the failure of this function.

11 Conclusion

11.1 This report seeks to ensure the work of the OSC is carried out in a targeted, incisive and timely style over the next 12 months

Robert Weeks
HEAD OF REGULATORY SERVICES

Background Documents:
None

Supporting Documents:
Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS), *The good scrutiny guide*, June 2019