

Planning work, delivering impact

Using the work programme and the annual report to make scrutiny more effective

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About this guide

This is a guide to enhancing the impact of scrutiny by using the scrutiny work programme, and the annual report. It replaces previously-published material on this subject¹.

This guide should be used alongside other publications:

- “Overview and scrutiny statutory guidance” (MHCLG, 2019)
- “The good scrutiny guide” (CfGS, 2019)
- “Scrutiny self-evaluation framework” (CfGS, 2018)
- “A councillor’s workbook on scrutiny” (LGA, 2017)

It sets out a six-step process for the management and delivery of an effective work programme that makes an impact – and sets out how that impact can be demonstrated.

Many councils have robust and mature arrangements for work programming. Many, however, do not – either because scrutiny does not benefit from the resourcing necessary to support such a process, or because councillors do not know where to access support. This paper is designed to support this second group of councils by drawing on the experiences of the first.

¹ “A cunning plan” (CfGS, 2011) and “The lion that roared” (CfGS, 2011).

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General principles

Before getting into the detail it's important to set out some first principles – because councils conduct work programming in different ways. This section covers four overarching issues:

- The importance of a member-led process;
- Whether to have a rolling work programme, updated throughout the year, or an annual, planned, process;
- Whether to have a single work programme for the whole scrutiny function, or individual work programmes for each committee;
- The integration of member development opportunities into substantive scrutiny work.

Member-led

Development and ownership of the work programme is something which has to be led by members.

Councillors are the people with the insight and perspective – and the legitimacy, derived from their status as elected representatives – to carry out this role. Officers can advise, and evidence can be taken from a wide range of sources. But ultimately the decision rests with scrutiny councillors.

Exercising this role with confidence means that scrutiny councillors should take the time to reflect on their priorities, and to apply some self-criticism to their own preferences. Councillors need to recognise that there may be subjects in which they are particularly interested – but they may not be the highest priority for the council, and scrutiny may not be able to add much by looking at those subjects. Being assured that the process is both member and evidence led is key to success.

A rolling work programme

Work programming is not a “start-stop” process. Scrutiny’s business is dynamic – priorities change as new issues emerge throughout the year. We wouldn’t recommend an approach which sees the entire work programme set out in advance – either for committee business or work in task and finish groups.

But time does need to be set aside for reflection and thinking – and for horizon-scanning. It’s right that scrutiny should, on a semi-regular basis, review and reflect on its overall priorities, and seek to refine the framework within which work sits. This paper assumes an annual work programme development and review process, aligned to the municipal calendar. An example of this is given in section xx.

A crucial part of being able to deliver a proportionate and effective work programme is the need to “escalate” new topics to scrutiny as the year goes on –

and to remove topics which may no longer be important. Chairs and support officers can periodically discuss the work programme off-line, develop ideas for new projects and propose them for confirmation at a committee meeting. This maintains proper oversight – and a clear system by which important issues can be escalated for more detailed discussion. Reasons for escalation are discussed in Step 3 below.

A single work programme

For councils which may only have one scrutiny committee, this question is moot. Many councils continue to have multiple committees though, and for them the issue needs to be addressed.

CfGS suggests that a single work programme for the whole scrutiny function is the most effective approach.

A single programme:

- Allows for better co-ordination, including the identification of cross-cutting issues and avoiding duplication;
- Ensures that scrutiny, overall, is consistently focused on the most important issues for the area, and that resources are directed appropriately;
- Avoids the risk that work has to be “found” to keep some committees “busy”, while others are overwhelmed;
- Makes executive, and partner, engagement in the work programming process easier to manage.

Some councillors might be concerned that this approach removes the independence of individual chairs, but if decisions can be made through consensus – by way of a transparent work programming process which involves a wider range of councillors – it will arguably make the process more robust.

Work programming as member development

With increased financial pressures on councils, opportunities to invest in member development are limited. There can be value in designing the work programme deliberately to take advantage of opportunities for “on the job” learning – this has the added benefit of taking learning out of the training room and into real-life scrutiny experiences.

This may be needed in election years, where the early contents of a new year’s work programme can be set by outgoing councillors and implemented as part of a member induction process. New councillors – whose work initially is likely to focus on scrutiny committees – can be tasked with carrying out a handful of short and sharp reviews, supported by officers. These will be on issues of local importance, but with the scopes of the work already set and designed to provide an introduction to council business – with the benefit that they will see members

making a substantive impact on the business of the authority before summer is out.

Indicative timetable

December and January	Step 1: ideas formation and longlisting
Early February	Step 2: fleshing out the detail
Early March	Step 3: prioritisation and shortlisting
Late March	Step 4: agreement
May onwards	The work programme for the municipal year is in place, and is subject to dynamic amendment as the months go by.
February / March	Feeding into the design of the following year's programme, Steps 5 and 6: evaluation and review

Step 1

Ideas formation and longlisting

What are the big issues affecting the local area and its inhabitants?

What changes do we expect in the coming year (or years) – and how can we influence those changes?

These are perhaps the two biggest questions that scrutiny can ask as it carries out its work.

At the time of writing, the future of local government (and local governance) is very unclear. The time has passed when councils could confidently put in place detailed ten-year strategies and go on to predictably deliver them. The world we live in is much more dynamic.

But some kind of planning is still needed. At the start of a working planning process, people involved in the scrutiny function will all have their own sense of what the big issues are likely to be in the short, medium and long term.

Usually, people with a direct, regular involvement in scrutiny will be invited to present ideas for reviews. This is likely to include:

- Councillors – both on scrutiny and on the executive;
- Council officers including those working in research/ policy;
- People working in partner organisations;
- Members of the public.

To garner the views of members of the public, scrutiny may put out a general call for topic ideas. The success of this depends on scrutiny's visibility in the local community. Scrutiny may, for example, be able to use networks developed in previous scrutiny work to reach people. Issuing general press releases is unlikely to result in much response, but experiences do differ.

Councillors are likely to have well-developed insights into the kinds of things which are important to their constituents.

Where ideas come from

- The council's Corporate Plan, and other key strategic documents (such as the manifesto of the Council's majority party);
- Major Government strategies, White Papers and new laws which materially affect how the Council will need to work;
- Monitoring information from the council, and from partners – performance data, research and insight, financial outturns, information from risk

- registers, and complaints data, which give a sense of where problem areas might lie;
- Evidence from external sources – for example, peer reviews and inspections by organisations like CQC and Ofsted;
- Evidence from other organisations and local campaigns. Some local groups may feel strongly about an issue affecting their neighbourhood;
- Evidence from the council’s complaints system and Ombudsman;
- Surveys carried out by the council;
- One to one discussions with senior officers and members of Cabinet – the issue of liaison with Cabinet is discussed in the next section;
- Previous scrutiny reviews. Avoiding “scope creep” in existing reviews means that when an ongoing review highlights a pressing, new issue, that should be considered as a separate topic rather than as a bolt-on to an existing review;
- Evidence of how local people are living their lives. Evidence from councillors on issues bubbling up through their ward surgeries and other work in neighbourhoods. Demographic data can also be useful here.

If you have one, much of this evidence might already be available to councillors in the form of an information digest. If not, and your council operates a one-year work programme, an exercise might be required to pull together a specific evidence base to support that annual process. A briefing setting out key information about the area and its challenges might be brought together to support a member workshop or conference, for example.

In a programme, the above information can be kept under periodic review. This is discussed in more detail in section 4.

The focus should be on seeing scrutiny as a place to which critical local issues can be escalated. These may be complex matters of developing policy, stubbornly poor performance in a certain area, or worries about future priorities driven by changes in national policy in a given area. Understanding which are the “right” things to escalate depends on a clear understanding of scrutiny’s role.

Ideas and scrutiny’s role

There may be some things that residents, and councillors, find important – but it may be that scrutiny would struggle to take action on them.

In order to understand what these issues might or not be, councillors will need to have regard to scrutiny’s central role.

The statutory scrutiny guidance comments on the importance for scrutiny of having a clearly articulated role. This can be used to focus your mind on where looking at an issue would contribute to this role or not. This is something we discuss in more detail when we come onto topic shortlisting, but councillors will also have to have regard to it at the earliest stages.

Step 2

Fleshing out the detail – liaising with decision-makers and developing “mini” scopes

With a range of ideas at scrutiny’s disposal, work is needed to decide how that work can be designed and framed to maximise its effect.

What topics can clearly be discarded – because they do not relate to scrutiny’s role (ie because scrutiny cannot add clear value), or because they might duplicate what is happening elsewhere, or because they do not relate to a matter which is a priority to the council or its residents?

These are questions which also need to be asked of topic ideas which emerge during the year.

Making a judgement on these questions – and helping to flesh out those ideas which *do* make the grade – is likely to involve discussion with the executive. In some councils, this may be a challenge. Relationships may make a full and frank conversation about scrutiny’s priorities difficult. But such conversations are necessary. If they do not happen, and at this comparative early stage, the risk is there that a review on a topic which might otherwise deliver real change is instead unproductive, and/or duplicates work happening elsewhere.

Informal conversation with the executive and senior officers can help to flesh out the issue, and can give scrutiny members the insight they need in order to refine their approach. At this and every stage, the final decision of what scrutiny work should be undertaken, and how, remains the decision of scrutiny alone.

Impact is the main criterion of whether a piece of work is worth developing or not. The longlisting process – when a chair (or chairs) works through a list of possibilities with a support officer – is about applying this criterion to loose ideas before going any further.

At this point, we suggest an informal conversation with the Council’s Leader and Chief Executive. This is not to allow these people to vet work programme suggestions, but to provide context which might be useful to councillors as they come to make a firm decision on the work programme.

There may be a number of reasons why suggested topics might need to be rethought, or reframed.

- It relates to similar review and oversight being carried out by the Executive – active contract monitoring, for example;
- It is not happening at the right time. The timescale may be too tight to influence a decision;
- It does not relate to an issue on which scrutiny can influence a decision-maker. The main issues involved may lie within the purview of central Government, or another partners, to resolve.

It's unlikely that any kind of scrutiny review on a given topic will be wholly unproductive. There will usually be an angle of some kind that scrutiny can use to approach a topic which presents a different, fresh perspective on a given topic or area. A rethink may reveal a way that scrutiny can look at a topic differently, and by so doing unlock opportunities to effect change.

Transparency here is key. Councillors and others will have presented possible ideas for scrutiny, so feedback on those suggestions will need to be provided.

A council's executive-scrutiny protocol might provide a mechanism by which this kind of early conversation can be carried out.

“Mini-scopes”

Talking about issues with the executive, with other stakeholders, and between scrutiny members themselves, will be helped by sketching out what a given topic is likely to entail. This will help significantly with the prioritisation and shortlisting process described below.

A short, mini-scope will provide enough detail for a potential topic to be properly evaluated. It will set out:

- The objectives for undertaking the work;
- The basics on method – how evidence will be gathered;
- The likely, or hoped for, outcomes.

It is likely to only be a side or two long. It is an exercise which can be used to determine whether or not a topic has legs – and what the best way might be to carry it out.

A mini-scope is probably not necessary in order to decide whether a single item is placed on a scrutiny agenda – but members will still need to justify the inclusion of such items with reference to the outcomes they will deliver.

Step 3

Prioritisation and shortlisting

This is a critical phase. The ultimate decision on what topics are taken forward sits with scrutiny members, supported by officers. The selection process needs to be transparent and fair. Scrutiny members all need to feel a sense of common ownership of what is decided – and the Executive will need to be able to understand what decisions have been made, and why.

The purpose of this exercise is to put together a work programme which will provide a framework for the year's activities, rather than attempting to plan out every single aspect of scrutiny's work for the next twelve months. Setting broad themes and agreeing major pieces of work which will fit within those themes, and deliver clear objectives, will provide members with the confidence to fill out and refine the programme further as the year goes on, as set out in the next section.

The critical things to be decided at this stage are:

- How will we decide what topics we do and don't look at? The section below talks about selection criteria, and about the use of conferences and informal dialogue to refine things;
- What are the most appropriate ways of working to deliver the outcomes those topics demand?
- Who do we need to speak to, in order to make this work a success?

Using selection criteria

Many councils have found that using a set of criteria against which possible topics can be judged brings rigour to the work programming process.

Selection criteria can bring transparency to the process. They can help to manage competing ideas. But they are no substitute for critical judgement. The application of selection criteria is subjective. Members and officers should recognise that political instinct is a valuable tool in selecting topics.

CfGS thinks that dialogue about a given topic, driven by the central question “will carrying out this work make a difference to local people?” provides a rigour that the use of more complex criteria could obscure. However, we also recognise that selection criteria can provide a reliable framework for such a conversation – with the caveats that such criteria should be approached with care, and that they provide the jumping-off point for a reasoned dialogue.

Examples of selection criteria

PAPER (Newport City Council)

<https://democracy.newport.gov.uk/documents/s2104/APPENDIX%201.pdf>

- PUBLIC INTEREST: The concerns of local people should influence the issues chosen for scrutiny;
- ABILITY TO CHANGE: Priority should be given to issues that the Committee can realistically influence, and which will result in a Cabinet decision being taken;
- PERFORMANCE: Priority should be given to the areas in which the Council, and other agencies, are not performing well;
- EXTENT: Priority should be given to issues that are relevant to all or large parts of the city;
- REPLICATION: Work programmes must take account of what else is happening in the areas being considered to avoid duplication or wasted effort.

TOPIC (Oxford City Council)

<https://mycouncil.oxford.gov.uk/documents/s48039/Appendix%202%20-%20TOPIC%20Work%20Plan%20Scoring.pdf>

- Timely
- Oxford priority
- Public Interest
- Influence
- Cost

Each criterion is scored from zero to 2. Supporting material states that “TOPIC can be used as a reference guide for councillors in selecting items, or it can be rigidly applied as a scoring system. How strictly the criteria is applied will depend of the number of items suggested and the resources available. Whilst the scoring system aspires to be objective, it cannot necessarily take account of the nuances and complexities of all issues, and Committees should use their best judgement in agreeing which items to take forward.”

Other examples

Some councils have a more comprehensive flowchart-style process, like these ones:

- Waverley:
https://www.waverley.gov.uk/downloads/file/5879/selection_criteria_for_overview_and_scrutiny_topics

- Guildford (in the O&S Procedure Rules, at 4-66):
<http://www2.guildford.gov.uk/councilmeetings/mgConvert2PDF.aspx?ID=8166>
- Norwich (also containing a set of TOPIC criteria using a slightly different set of definitions to those used above): <https://tinyurl.com/yxbfsnk7>
- Lewisham (on page 4):
<https://councilmeetings.lewisham.gov.uk/documents/s75003/05%20CYP%20first%20meeting%20work%20programme%20report%202020-21.pdf>
- Caerphilly (at Appendix 3):
<https://democracy.caerphilly.gov.uk/documents/s32919/Environment%20Sustainability%20Forward%20Work%20Programme.pdf?LLL=0>

Criteria can be negative as well as positive. So, one criterion which would work against selection might be that the issue is already been dealt with satisfactorily elsewhere.

Topics will often be scored against criteria. Topics with the highest scores are those which end up getting selected. As above, care should be taken in this exercise – a scoring process will be subjective.

“Scrutiny conferences”

It used to be common for councils to convene member workshops or conferences to develop, prioritise and agree the work programme. In some councils these were quite involved affairs – sometimes taking up a full day and involving contributions from external invitees (such as representatives of the NHS).

These kind of events do represent the “gold standard” for drawing scrutineers and partners together to talk about future priorities. The free flow of conversation and reflection can be useful for partners just as much as scrutiny, by giving them insights into each others’ work and priorities. They do, however, require careful planning and organisation, and this comes at a cost.

These kinds of conferences can:

- Raise scrutiny’s profile within and outside the authority;
- Provide a prompt for senior council officers and executive members to engage, where they might otherwise be difficult to pin down;
- Nudge people in other positions and power and influence (partners, for example) to engage where otherwise local government scrutiny might not be seen as a priority;
- Be a visible expression of member leadership of the scrutiny function.

Designing a work programming conference as a deliberative process can also help to break down conflicts and tensions and can resolve competing priorities

between potential topics. It could be a good way to consciously “reset” attitudes on scrutiny in a council where the impact and effectiveness of the function is thought to have drifted.

Other ways of drawing together the work programme

If a large conference is simply not a possibility, there are plenty of alternatives.

Smaller, informal discussions between councillors and other stakeholders are a good place to start. Councillors can be invited to collectively review and update a document held in the cloud (although willingness to do this will depend on councillors’, and officers’, IT proficiency). Under these circumstances, an iterative approach is likely to work best – slowly refining and adding to a work programming document over the course of a few weeks, as part of a time-limited exercise. Keeping things open-ended risks that nothing will end up being decided. In the case of disagreement the final decision will lie with the chair.

Identifying different ways of working

Increasingly, the traditional large-scale task and finish review feels more resource intensive, and less realistic, to deliver. Fewer councils benefit from a team of scrutiny officers, able to devote months full-time to investigate a given topic. The policy landscape in councils is now much more fast moving – a six-month (or longer) review may end up delivering its outputs into a very different space than the original scope envisaged.

Experimenting with different ways of working allows scrutiny to adopt a suite of less resource intensive ways of working, and to mould ways of working to better suit the range of topics being looked at.

Many of these different ways of working have a long pedigree.

More detail can be found in “The good scrutiny guide” (2019), but some methods are described below.

Different methods

- An item on a normal committee agenda. A typical scrutiny agenda will typically have only two or three substantive items on it, and each of those items will be ones on which scrutiny is prepared to make substantive recommendations. If the proposal is to put an item on a committee agenda to learn more about it, or to “note” progress, committee is probably not the best place for that update. It goes without saying that reports produced by officers to support such items will need to engage directly with members’ objectives, rather than just providing generalised information on the subject at hand;

- A committee meeting with a single item on the agenda. Where a committee meeting is wholly given over to a single substantive topic it will be easier to dig into that issue. Evidence can be taken from a variety of sources. A support officer, or other officer, may produce a more detailed briefing for councillors driven by the needs of members. Because the meeting is still a formal committee meeting it may have the feel of a Parliamentary select committee – it may be used to hold a Cabinet member or senior officer to account on a pressing performance issue, for example;
- A single meeting (not necessarily a committee meeting). Removing scrutiny from the constraints of a formal committee meeting can mean conducting work which engages better with local people, and a wider range of stakeholders. These events can be designed as traditional public meetings, or more innovatively as spaces where local people can deliberate alongside councils, and come out with a consensus view on a complex local topic supported by information provided by independent experts – a “deliberative mini-public”;
- An inquiry day. This is a single half-day or all-day session which might involve a group of members taking evidence from a wide range of witnesses, and having small group discussion with a larger range of stakeholders;
- A single member being commissioned to carry out research on behalf of a committee. A member can be commissioned as a rapporteur, to investigate a topic (probably with some officer support) and to return to the committee in due course with their own recommendations;
- A small group of councillors carrying out a short review. This will look more like a traditional, longer, task and finish group, but will be less resource intensive. Members might get together three or four times over a month or so to talk over a topic. Meetings have to be planned carefully to ensure that councillors get the right information at the right time, and to make sure that the group stays focused on their objectives.
- A longer term task and finish group, or a standing panel. Longer term pieces of work are more resource intensive, and are often broader and more exploratory. This is where the risk of “scope creep” is most significant. There is still a place for these kinds of reviews – particularly on complex, cross-cutting issues like equality or climate change. But increasingly, even better resourced councils will find themselves unable to commit to more than a couple of these kinds of reviews in a year.

Engaging the public

Different ways of working can also involve different ways of engaging the public. The early scoping process will need to consider how the public ought to be engaged in a piece of work, because this is likely to influence its effectiveness.

Traditional methods can include local surveys, workshops, site visits, public engagement “events”, focus groups and interviews with individual people – which can be either informal or formal. Members of the public, or other stakeholders, can also be co-opted onto working groups.

Novel methods can integrate members of the public more meaningful into scrutiny work through co-production (using “hack days” to develop a solution to a complex problem), or through the establishment of citizens’ juries or assemblies.

There should probably be a mix of methods used across a range of topics across the year – reflecting the need for scrutiny to be involved in a varied slice of issues, each with their own distinct demands. Quite apart from anything else this also introduces variety to members’ work – and recognises that councillors are likely to have a range of personal, professional and civic commitments which means that their ability to engage will vary significantly. Having a sense of councillors’ working constraints will assist; councillors can be invited to take part in certain reviews as a deliberate attempt to contribute to member development.

Work that does not require a group of members to come together in set times and places to discuss issues can provide a useful way to engage groups of councillors who may otherwise struggle to commit to taking part.

Rather than expecting members to attend frequent meetings, they can come together online through tools like MS Teams, reviewing shared documents together and reflecting on issues when time allows. Where a small number of members are happy to work together like this, it has the potential to make for a less resource-intensive – and more obviously member-led – process.

Managing a work programme in an election year

Election years can present a particular challenge to the transaction of effective scrutiny. Business needs to stop to avoid the pre-election period in March. Committees may only convene, after the election, in June – meaning that detailed scrutiny work may not begin in earnest until September. An effective “loss” of six months of work during this period is clearly not ideal.

This challenge may be felt particularly keenly in councils that elect by thirds.

One solution is to design an induction process for new scrutiny members which involves short, sharp work on recognised priorities – to give members a grounding in how the council works and how scrutiny works, framed by the opportunity to get involved in work that delivers an actual result.

A couple of short reviews in June and July will allow new members to cut their teeth on real work, deliver induction and training objectives, and ensure that momentum is built around scrutiny’s work which can be followed through into the autumn. In the autumn, the opportunity can be taken to agree a fuller work programme for the whole year, drawing on the learning from these introductory exercises.

Step 4

Agreement and dynamic amendment

Agreeing the work programme

The overall work programme for the year will usually be formally agreed at a committee meeting; in a non-election year this can be expected to happen in March.

A good work programme will usually:

- Plan out enough work to provide a framework for members' activity for the coming year – giving a level of certainty around resource allocation for the most significant pieces of work;

Provide enough opportunity for the councillors who want to flag up where emerging issues are likely to develop during the year and provide space for them;

- Provide a basis for councillors to return to the objectives in the programme and evaluate them when the programme is complete.

Amending the work programme to account for new priorities

New priorities will emerge during the year. When this happens, new topics will need to be subject to the same process of review that we have set out above. New ideas will need to be floated with senior officers, a mini-scope will need to be developed to tease out the detail and a selection process will need to be undertaken, usually managed by the chair. In other publications we have referred to this as a process of “escalation” of important matters to committee.

These topics, however, are likely to have a different flavour to those which may be set out in an annual process. They are likely to reflect emerging issues – probably involving performance concerns – where swift and effective scrutiny action is needed. They may demand a particularly flexible and light touch approach to methodology – with the use of member rapporteurs, or single committee agenda items, being the default.

Chairs and others will need to keep a watching brief on matters across the area as they emerge – making use of an information digest.

This is not about gathering and distributing large amounts of information, but about councillors and the scrutiny officers who support them having their ears to the ground, keeping abreast of local and national developments and having the confidence to grasp knotty issues as they arise. This is the principal means by which members can avoid the risk of important matters “falling between the gaps” – a perennial worry for councillors, but only resolvable if the information digest has the right information, presented in a way that makes sense for councillors, at the right time. Out of date or partial information in the digest risks that members are lulled into a false sense of security.

Sniffing around: the need for informal investigation

Ideas for scrutiny work often germinate from the idea that something doesn't quite smell right – official data might be at odds with what councillors have experienced on the ground, or a councillor may have been contacted by a member of the public with concerns about a topic.

Scrutiny does not deal with individual complaints or problems – but it can and should use those one-off examples as a jumping off point for investigating whether a wider, more systemic issue exists. Before deciding whether a matter should be escalated to scrutiny for more formal consideration, a chair or ordinary member – possibly with officer support – can look into a given issue in a little more detail to understand whether fuller, formal inquiry is required. Councils should recognise that this is a legitimate way for scrutiny to consider how its resources should be used.

This investigation could demonstrate that further inquiry is not justified – or it could reveal a more significant issue.

The nature of how councils work means that councillors and officers should expect to engage in light touch work of this nature throughout the year; these discussions can be reported back to committee in the interests of transparency.

The way members keep this “watching brief” must give members the confidence that they are getting an accurate picture of what is happening on the ground. This will reduce the risk of missing important issues.

When new issues do emerge, councillors will need to be able to transparently make quick and confident decisions about inclusion of important matters on the programme. This is why building in space in the annual programme for such in-year matters is important.

Step 3

Post-delivery evaluation

What impact did our work have?

What insight can we feed into the way that we work in future?

Sometimes, it can be easier to move on to new work after a long review is complete. Evaluation can feel like an afterthought.

There is value in conducting a “wash up” of larger pieces of work once complete – and of semi-regular washup of scrutiny’s work more generally. Far from being a navel-gazing exercise, this is about scrutiny living its values – reflecting on its own activities and performance in order to improve, using a form of self-scrutiny.

- Washing up individual pieces of work – the subject of this section.
- Washing up scrutiny’s activity more generally – the subject of the next section.

Washing up and debriefing from individual pieces of work needs not be a complex exercise, but it does require thought. There are likely to be two stages:

- Debriefing shortly after the work is complete. Once scrutiny has considered an issue (and recommendations have been submitted) the chair, along with other members, and support officers might get together for half an hour and think about how the work went;
- Debriefing on outcomes. This is a longer term proposition. Some months, or possibly more than a year, after the work has concluded members and officers can meet to consider the actual impact of the work. Were recommendations implemented? Have things now improved for local people?

Step 6

Reporting back and taking action to improve – completing the cycle

Annual reports

The act of learning lessons can be formalised by way of a scrutiny annual report.

Often, annual reports are summaries of activity – descriptions of work carried out with little analysis. They can be subject to fairly perfunctory discussion at full Council.

Really, annual reports provide a way of evaluating the implementation of the work programme, and of scrutiny more generally. They are an annual MOT of scrutiny and its work.

So what should the objectives be of a good annual report?

- Highlighting excellent work that scrutiny has done, and success stories in terms of impact;
- Accounting for the resources expended on the function during the year;
- Reflecting on performance generally, drawing on the washups of individual reviews;
- Drawing in the views of stakeholders on scrutiny's work;
- Provoking discussion at Council about scrutiny's role, responsibilities and effectiveness.

It is the role of the council's statutory scrutiny officer (in an upper tier or unitary authority) to carry out work to promote and support the function, and the statutory officer should therefore have a prominent role in carrying out work to support the production of the report.

Members should “front up” the report – but more than that, the report should be a product of member conversation. It should give a member view on scrutiny's role now, and its role in the future.

Putting an annual report together in practice

Information on scrutiny's work will be collected throughout the year – in responses to scrutiny's recommendations, washup exercises on individual reviews, and so on.

The annual report will draw this information together.

The timing of the report's preparation will depend on the time of year when it is due to be presented. It makes some sense that the annual report be presented to Council to coincide with the production and agreement of the work programme. But it may be logically easier to do it at a different time of year.

The main tasks will be:

- Member agreement on the report's objectives;
- Collation of information about scrutiny's performance in line with these objectives;
- Discussion with key stakeholders about scrutiny's performance. This may be the time to carry out a short member survey on scrutiny's effectiveness. Some possible questions are listed in the appendix;
- Member discussion about actions to take on improvement. Council may be invited to hold the scrutiny function to account on its implementation of improvement and development plans; this is about scrutiny living its values as a part of the council focused on improvement;
- Finalisation and editing of written material. An annual report should be light on discursive narrative, focused on evidence of effectiveness and impact and detail on improvement actions. A six or eight side document will probably be sufficient;
- Agreement on the nature of a debate at full Council. Rather than for scrutiny's annual report to be simply noted, presentation at Council is an opportunity for member reflection on support to the function. It presents a good opportunity for the executive to formally and publicly commit to the function too.

An annual report should not be subject to "signoff" by anyone other than scrutiny members themselves. Depending on council practice and standing orders, it may be that the report is agreed at a scrutiny committee prior to submission to Council, but this is not necessary.

Scrutiny evaluation in general

Ongoing evaluation of the scrutiny function is always valuable, and provides the opportunity for a stocktake more fundamental than that provided through an annual report. Councils do this in different ways.

As is good governance practice, some councils may carry out more formal evaluations – and may bring in external organisations to do so. CfGS is one of these organisations. These types of reviews offer a valuable reset opportunity if

scrutiny is thought to be ineffective, or if the council is bringing about a significant change to its operating model which requires reflection on scrutiny's overall role or the scrutiny function has not been evaluated in this way for a while. Whatever the reason, there is probably no need to carry out such reviews more than once in a few years.

Some councils may carry out more frequent internal evaluations, which may coincide with a review of the constitution or of governance systems more generally. These could focus on the scrutiny rules and procedures. CfGS has produced material to support self-evaluations, which can be found at <https://www.cfgs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/CfPS-Scrutiny-Evaluation-v2-SINGLE-PAGES.pdf>.

More information on the kind of independent advice that CfGS can provide on scrutiny improvement can be found at <https://www.cfgs.org.uk/home-2/consultancy/sir/>