# A GUIDE FOR COUNCILLORS ON SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMMING

This guide is designed to support the development of the Scrutiny Work Programme.

## 1. The role of Scrutiny and Overview

Scrutiny and overview allows Councillors and the public to contribute to how things are done in West Norfolk. It enables them to hold the Executive and other organisations to account and ensure that decisions taken are well informed and transparent.

Councillors should refer to the Overview and Scrutiny Statutory Guidance, the Scrutiny Guide and the Scrutiny and the Executive Protocol for further information.

Effective Scrutiny should:

- Provide constructive 'critical friend' challenge.
- Drive improvement in public services and strategic decision making.
- Hold the Executive to account for their decisions.
- Review Council policy, the way policies are implemented and their impact on local people.
- Contribute towards the Corporate Priorities of the Council.

Scrutiny Work Programmes should be designed around the above.

Scrutiny Work Programmes should not be a generalised oversight of the Council and its partners or mirror other agendas, it should focus on high impact items.

## 2. What topics are suitable for Scrutiny?

The Statutory Scrutiny Guidance sets out that Scrutiny has the power to look at anything which affects the area or the area's inhabitants. This means that scrutiny is not limited to reviewing Council Services. Topics that Scrutiny could consider are:

- High profile issues in the borough and high-profile national issues impacting the borough, including issues on which people hold strong views and areas of local community concern.
- Scrutiny of organisations that receive public funding to deliver services in the borough.
- High impact decisions to be made by the Cabinet and Council.

## 3. Deciding Scrutiny Topics: Work Programming

The Statutory Scrutiny Guidance states that "Effective work programming is the bedrock of the scrutiny function.  Done well it lays 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"

The Scrutiny Panels will decide their work programmes at the beginning of the year.  When selecting items for inclusion on the Work Programme, Members should:

- Prioritise topics where scrutiny can make an impact, add value or contribute to policy development.
- Achieve a balanced spread of items over the year.
- Incorporate a range of methods and tools to carry out scrutiny work, this could include establishing an Informal Working Group, arranging briefing sessions with officers, or meeting as a Panel to formulate their line of questioning prior to a Panel Meeting.
- Leave some space for the unknown items which could crop up during the year.
- Aim for one or two substantive items at each meeting.  Programme these at the beginning of the year so that officers have plenty of lead in time to prepare reports for scrutiny.

Work Programmes should not include items that are for noting or information only.  Relevant background information can be made available to Scrutiny Councillors, but should not take up time at Panel Meetings.

Members should consider the following when considering items for the Work Programme:

- Is the proposed item for information or noting, if so it can be provided to Members outside of meetings?
- Does the issue affect a significant number of borough residents?
- Is the issue strategic and significant?
- How can scrutiny add value?
- Will scrutiny be duplicating the work of others?

The Scrutiny Statutory Guidance states that "Scrutiny members should accept that shortlisting can be difficult; scrutiny committees have finite resources and deciding how these are best allocated is tough.  They should understand that, if work programming is robust and effective there might well be issues that they want to look at that nonetheless are not selected".

Members need to ensure that the very best, high impact topics are chosen and that they are not duplicating the work of others.

## 4. Methods and techniques available for Scrutiny Work

In programming items, Members may like to consider how they will prepare for items to be scrutinised at meetings.  They can gather evidence, seek external expertise and

look at practice elsewhere.  Some of these tasks can be carried out in advance of the item being considered by using the following methods:

- Establish an Informal Working Group or Task Group to investigate a topic in more depth and report back to the formal meeting.
- Focus groups, workshops or surveys.
- Briefing sessions and requesting background information.
- Investigation, reading and research.

## 5. Formulation of the Work Programme

Scrutiny Panels are encouraged to hold a roundtable event at the beginning of the Municipal Year to agree their Work Programme.  This event could include:

- Inviting Portfolio Holders to provide an overview of their work for the year.
- Presentation from officers on high profile/impact projects coming forward.
- Receiving information from external partners.
- Prioritising items for the Work Programme, whilst leaving space to be reactive to ad hoc items coming forward throughout the year.
- Production of a finalised Work Programme so that officers and Members have plenty of time to prepare for items coming forward.

## 6. How to add an item to the Work Programme

All Members can suggest items for consideration by the Panels.  The opportunities to do this include:

- Get involved in work programming sessions at the beginning of the Municipal Year.
- Raise an item under the Work Programme Agenda Item at the Meeting.
- Submit details of your request to the Chair, outlining how the Council can shape, influence the decisions and how the item relates to the Corporate Priorities of the Council.

The Chair of the relevant Panel will then discuss the item and will arrange for it to be scheduled onto an Agenda as required, being mindful of relevance, the resources required to bring the item forward and timescales.

For further information please contact democratic.services@west-norfolk.gov.uk