

Checklist: Six steps to help make scrutiny 'Fit for the Future'

Taking into account the observations in our Discussion Paper: Six themes to help make scrutiny 'Fit for the Future' we have developed the following checklist for scrutiny members in councils to consider.

1 **Know your role** – what you 'should' be doing, what you 'can' do and what you 'can't' do.

At a basic level understanding what the relevant legislation, guidance and your council's Constitution says about overview and scrutiny.

2 **Know your powers and what's 'possible' in scrutiny** – what options, tools and ways of working are available to you?

This will partly come from legislation, guidance and Constitutions but to understand what's 'possible' will require knowledge of the wide range of approaches that have been tried elsewhere as well as critical and innovative thinking to trial new methods.

3 **Know what you are trying to achieve** – be clear about the aims for the scrutiny function overall, but **crucially** the specific aims and purpose of scrutinising **every** topic you choose to examine.

Knowing what you are trying to achieve from the scrutiny of a topic should inform how you look at it, the evidence you need to gather and the timeliness of the work. This should be a primary consideration for every topic rather than just for example a handful of topics identified for task and finish enquiry. This also relies on scrutiny members taking ownership of their choice of scrutiny topics and the number of scrutiny topics they can realistically consider properly to enable them to have an impact.

4 Plan your scrutiny work to achieve your aims – appropriate topics and methods for **every** scrutiny item.

There is a huge range of potential approaches to scrutiny activity. For each topic there should be a consideration of the most appropriate method(s) to gather the evidence needed to fulfil the committee's aims. This should be about more than just deciding which topics are dealt via an officer report, and which are to be the subject of a resource-intensive task and finish investigation. There is a range of approaches in between. Awareness of approaches that have been used across other scrutiny functions in England and Wales, as well as imagination and innovation, can help to identify potential ways of working. Part of planning work should involve a consideration of whether and how stakeholders - including the public - could be involved both in helping with topic selection and providing evidence as part of scrutiny activity.

5 Design support arrangements to achieve your aims – the right knowledge, skills, experience and appropriate training provision.

A theme from our work is that the world is changing rapidly and has changed significantly since the Local Government Act 2000 was passed. Whether its financial pressures, technological advances or the revolution in communications most evident in the growth in social media, scrutiny support should be able to help members harness these opportunities whilst managing the risks they present. In light of this, Councils should think about the skills, knowledge and experience needed to do this in a way that helps scrutiny functions to have an impact.

6 Regularly evaluate the effectiveness of scrutiny activity, and make changes based on feedback.

Introduce a discipline of reflecting on the effectiveness of scrutiny activity as a matter of course, and link this back to the intended aims/outcomes identified at the beginning of scrutiny activity. However, a robust and objective self-evaluation is only possible if there is:

- a clear and shared understanding of the purpose of scrutiny;
- wide-ranging knowledge of potential scrutiny methods;
- a clear and shared understanding of the aims of specific pieces of scrutiny work; and
- a culture which welcomes robust and honest self-reflection and seeks continuous improvement.