

In Depth Overview and Scrutiny Reviews

Introduction

An In Depth Overview & Scrutiny review is a detailed study of a subject involving the gathering of evidence from a variety of sources. This will usually involve meeting with stakeholders, holding focus groups/workshops, undertaking site visits, reviewing existing documents, calling for written submissions from interested parties, interviews and research into good practice.

A scrutiny review may take place over a number of months and will involve working to terms of reference and a project plan agreed by the Scrutiny Committees. The review will usually result in a final report outlining the findings of the review and will include recommendations to the Cabinet.

Overview & Scrutiny Committees can undertake reviews on any area within their remit including review of how a policy or service area is working or a local issue as part of their community leadership role enabling them to engage and reflect the voice and concerns of the public. Committees may choose to review issues that are of importance to the public and where there is potential to make recommendations to improve the quality of life for residents. It is important that any topic chosen has a good rationale for review, does not duplicate existing work and is capable of being influenced.

The following is a brief step by step guide on undertaking an in depth scrutiny review. Attached at **Appendix A** is a flow chart summary of some of the key stages in undertaking a scrutiny review.

Step 1 – Scoping the Review

The key to any successful project is in the planning and in order to successfully manage a review Members need to set out a project plan for the review which will involve:

- Setting out Terms of Reference;
- Determining Objectives and Desired Outcomes;
- Deciding what needs to be done and by whom;
- Defining what research and evidence is required;
- Determining how often and when to meet and whether any additional meetings are required;
- Setting out the purpose and focus of each meeting.

Step 2 – Preparation of a Position Statement

Position Statements are helpful in terms of assisting Overview & Scrutiny Committees in establishing the context of the issue being reviewed. Position statements will enable Committees to determine where we are now and why, identify where we want to be and the issues we need to address to reach there. Position Statements can also assist Committees in identifying any additional information required to inform the review.

In order to formulate position statements Committees may wish to consider the information currently available on the issue such as the results of recent consultation, performance information and past reports/reviews. Members may also request specific background reports from relevant Officers on the Councils current position and key issues.

Step 3 – Evidence Gathering

In undertaking a scrutiny review Committees will need to consider the evidence they require to inform their review, how this may be gathered and from where. In doing so Committees may wish to consider the following:

Potential Sources of Evidence

- Previous reports;
- Existing plans and strategies;
- Stakeholders including the public, local interest groups, voluntary sector;
- Expert Advisors/Witnesses;
- Comparative Data;
- Good Practice Literature;
- Performance Management Data;
- Audit & Inspection Reports.

Potential Methods for Gathering Evidence

- Surveys;
- Interviews;
- Focus Groups/Workshops;
- Calling for written submissions;
- Site Visits;
- Meetings with Service Users at relevant locations.

In terms of engaging with the public the methods used to gather evidence as part of scrutiny reviews are critical. Committees have an important role in listening to and representing the views of local people and relevant stakeholders. There may be occasions whereby scrutiny reviews will need to establish dialogue with all sectors of the community and take into account the diverse need and views of different groups. Therefore more specialist methods of engagement will need to be considered and Members can bring forward their own ideas based on their experiences and knowledge of community needs.

Step 4 – Reporting & Recommending

Once the evidence has been gathered Committees will need to be satisfied that it has all the information it requires to complete the review. Following this Committees will need to draft a report outlining its findings and make recommendations. This involves careful consideration of the evidence in order to:

- Determine the key issues identified;
- Decide on the improvements Committees are looking to achieve;
- Identify solutions and actions required to bring about those improvements;
- Evaluate the options from the various perspectives of those affected;
- Agree a way forward and make recommendations.

In compiling its final report it is vital that Committees refer to the evidence and ensure that the recommendations can clearly be linked to the evidence. This ensures that the recommendations are robust, credible and will withstand challenge.

Step 5 – Review & Monitor

Once a scrutiny review has been completed it is important for Committees to ensure that any accepted recommendations are monitored and outcomes reported back. It is also regarded as good practice to provide feedback to all those who contributed to the review and evaluate whether the anticipated outcomes have been achieved.

Undertaking an Overview and Scrutiny Review

Stage One - Scoping the Review, Terms of Reference & Project Planning

- What are the objectives of the review?
- What are the desired outcomes of the review?
- What and whose evidence is required?
- Are expert advisors/witnesses to be used?
- What publicity is required for the review?
- What research is required?
- How can the public be involved in the review?

Stage Two - Preparation of a Position Statement

- Establish where we are now and why
- What information do we currently have and what additional information is required
- Identify where we want to be and key issues to be address
- Review existing reports and relevant key documents
- Review of Best Practice
- Identify any relevant Council/Government policies
- Adjust project plan if necessary following provision of more detailed information

Stage Three - Evidence of Gathering

- Meet with external stakeholders
- Hold Focus Groups/Workshops
- Research other organisations and good practice
- Undertake Site Visits
- Surveys/Commissioned Research
- Written submissions from Stakeholders
- Literature review
- Consult with service users, local interest groups, existing partnership groups, community and voluntary groups

Stage Four - Report & Recommendations

- Scrutinise the evidence
- Ensure the evidence is robust, rational and consistent
- Provide feed back to contributors
- Agree final report
- Make recommendations

Stage Five - Feedback, Review & Monitor

- Monitoring the outcomes over a period of time
- Assessing how the outcomes reflect the original purpose of the review