

Scrutiny Annual Report 2020/21

Page 337

February 2022 (prepared for the postponed December 2021 Council meeting)

Surrey County Council Scrutiny Retrospective

- The Council reviewed its scrutiny function in 2019 and the Government also published its new statutory guidance for local authority overview & scrutiny.
- As a result, a report to Council in May 2019 made changes to the structure of our committees and recommendations to improve practice.
- The number of Select Committees was reduced from six to four while retaining the Select Committee Chairs & Vice-Chairs' Group with dedicated Scrutiny Officer support for each committee complemented by a Democratic Services Assistant.
- The capacity of Select Committees was bolstered by having two Task Group Leads (Vice-Chairs) alongside a Chair to provide extra leadership and resource to manage scrutiny reviews.
- Council resolved to increase the use of task & finish methodology with a view to producing more in-depth reviews and evidence based recommendations.

The Government’s Statutory Guidance on Local Authority Overview & Scrutiny highlighted the importance of a cultural commitment to scrutiny within councils.

- At Surrey County Council that is manifested in a commitment that no major decision would come to Cabinet without having been scrutinised first by the relevant Select Committee.
- Cabinet Members attend each and every public meeting of Select Committees to present reports and answer questions recognising the legal and democratic legitimacy of scrutiny.
- The Leader attends the Select Committee Chairs and Vice-Chairs’ Group bi-annually as part of ongoing engagement between the executive and scrutiny.
- The majority of recommendations made by Select Committee and Task & Finish Groups have been accepted and implemented by the Cabinet.
- Senior Officers engage with Select Committees on key policy initiatives and provide impartial advice early via regular liaison meetings with Chairs & Vice-Chairs.

The Guidance was clear that preparation and access to information was vital for good scrutiny:

- All Select Committees now operate pre-meetings ahead of public meetings to review reports, agree and allocate key lines of enquiry, and discuss potential recommendations in advance to help ensure they have a defined impact on the ground.
- The use of KLOEs in briefing notes has risen steadily from around 50% pre-2019 to 80% at the last round of meetings in October 2021.
- Each Select Committee receives regular performance information from across the Council to help them to do their job effectively.
- Select Committees employ a variety of methods to scrutinise topics from single agenda items to themed meetings, task & finish groups, Member reference groups and by organising briefings from experts to increase their knowledge and understanding.



Scrutiny work since 2019

- Since these changes were made in May 2019 the use of Task & Finish Group has dramatically increased with no fewer than 10 groups being set up; all of which reported to decision-makers complete with SMART recommendations.
- Particular successes include recommendations made on the Council's Climate Change Strategy and Adult Mental Health services, the steer provided on the adoption of a new children's service for children aged 12-25 in care or the edge of care ('No Wrong Door') and the governance model for Your Fund Surrey and the critical friend support lent to the Surrey Fire & Rescue Service as it went through its transformation.
- Scrutiny of the budget setting process and draft budget now starts earlier and is coordinated across all four Select Committees complemented by a Budget Sub-Group that monitors in-year financial performance.
- Select Committees routinely receive and review performance data as part of their overview function using this data to inform lines of enquiry and choice of scrutiny topics.
- More external witnesses have been called to give evidence to Select Committees and engagement with stakeholders is growing.
- Finally, in response to the restrictions on public meetings enforced by the COVID pandemic Select Committees moved to fully remote meetings with no adverse impact on output and created greater opportunities for witnesses and the public to engage with scrutiny work.

Continued

- Since the elections of 2021 the scrutiny team have delivered comprehensive induction programmes for Select Committees.
- A series of seven scrutiny training modules were rolled out for new and returning Members covering the key aspects of good scrutiny from choosing topics, questioning techniques and making SMART recommendations.
- Select Committees have successfully navigated the return to in-person meetings making use of hybrid approaches to allow for the remote participation of witnesses in their scrutiny reviews.

Select Committee Good Practice Examples

Adults & Health	Children, Families, Lifelong Learning & Culture
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adult Mental Health Task Group • Joint Scrutiny of Epsom & St Helier NHS Trust 'Improving Healthcare Together' Programme • Overview of NHS Winter Pressures • Regular subject matter briefings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'No Wrong Door' Task Group • SEND Task Group • Scrutiny of Children's Homes Transformation • Surrey Safeguarding Partnership and Family Voice • Joint scrutiny of Emotional Wellbeing & Mental Health Service with Adults & Health Select Committee
Communities, Environment & Highways	Resources & Performance
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greener Futures Task Group and subsequent Member Reference Group • Scrutiny of the set up of Your Fund Surrey • Overview of Surrey Fire & Rescue Service Transformation • Highways Maintenance Contract Reference Group 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overview of Council performance management • Overview of Transformation programme • Moving Closer to Residents Task Group • Customer Service Experience Task Group
Cross-committee work:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sub-group scrutiny of in-year budget performance and Select Committee early engagement and scrutiny of draft revenue and capital budgets. • Regular review of remit specific performance data. 	

The Future of Surrey County Council Overview & Scrutiny

- To continue our improvements to the function in 2022 a number of areas of focus have been identified by Members and in having due regard to the statutory guidance:
 - Increasing public interaction with Select Committees and increasing public participation in scrutiny processes as witnesses, co-optees and through collecting evidence.
 - Broadening the scope of our scrutiny methods to include meetings in the community, increased use of data and novel ways of working such ‘scrutiny in a day’ reviews and the continued use of remote meeting technology.
 - Implementing a co-designed Communications Plan to increase the visibility of scrutiny work and the profile of our Select Committees both to the wider authority and to Surrey residents.
 - Regular reporting of scrutiny work and its impact to Council.
 - Devising a new protocol to cover the effective scrutiny of council owned companies.

Next Steps

- Further Scrutiny Report to Council in May 2022 to cover the activity of the Select Committees during 2021/22.
- Regular update of Select Committee work at each Council meeting from March 2022.
- Development of plans to embed public participation in our scrutiny processes.