

Decision Report - Executive Decision

Forward Plan Reference: N/A

Decision Date – 08 May 2024

Key Decision – No

Confidential Information – No



Scrutiny Review Update

Executive Member(s): Cllr Bill Revans, Leader of the Council and Lead Member for Governance and Communications

Local Member(s) and Division: Cllr Dimery, Cllr Filmer, Cllr Redman, Cllr Slocombe, Cllr Wren as Scrutiny Chair's

Lead Officer: Scott Wooldridge, Head of Democratic Services

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Summary

1. The purpose of this report is to update the Executive on the Scrutiny Review conducted by the 5 Scrutiny Committee Chairs, following endorsement at the Corporate and Resources Scrutiny Committee on 25 April 2024 and to seek support for the recommendations.
2. The recommendations are intended to be considered at Full Council on 22 May 2024.

Recommendations

3. The Executive are asked to consider and comment on the following recommendations agreed by the Corporate and Resources Committee and endorsed by the 5 Scrutiny Committee Chairs:
 - (1) **The current structure of 5 scrutiny committees to remain in place, with a further scrutiny review to be conducted by the scrutiny chairs in late 2024/early 2025 following any potential service restructure.**
 - (2) **The scrutiny manager is tasked with preparing a revised and improved scrutiny report template, which enables clearer and more concise presentation of reports, a standard consistency of reports across all 5 scrutiny committees, a clearer link between committee recommendations onto the Executive/Executive Member(s) and ensuring service areas clearly demonstrate where scrutiny is able to add value.**
 - (3) **That all 5 scrutiny committees adopt a consistent approach to dealing with information only items, in order that agendas are kept clear for items with**

specific recommendations and the opportunity for the committees to add value. This information also to include details of any delegated decisions the scrutiny chair has been consulted on.

- (4) To bolster the links between all 5 scrutiny committees and the Executive by ensuring clear communication between the parties and encourage increased opportunities for committee chairs to update the Executive on areas of focus and present any recommendations/proposals the committee have agreed. Also for the Democratic Services team to establish a central record of all formal scrutiny recommendations and the responses to them.**
- (5) The scrutiny manager to liaise with the 5 Group Leaders in advance of the AGM Council meeting (May 2024) in order to provide detailed attendance information on each of the Committee's membership, to ensure committee membership and substitutes reflect maximum engagement and consistency.**
- (6) The scrutiny manager to liaise with the 5 Group Leaders to ensure a consistent, timely and wherever possible consistent approach to scrutiny substitutes.**
- (7) Elected committee membership to remain as 13 individual members.**
- (8) To continue with the monthly meetings of the 5 Scrutiny Chairs, Vice Chairs and scrutiny manager.**
- (9) To continue with the model of an Executive Director aligned to each Committee as the lead service officer and to encourage continued attendance from all relevant Executive Members.**
- (10) To support the continuation of a dedicated scrutiny resource from the Democratic Services team, to allow for more effective and efficient scrutiny and increase scrutiny opportunities, whilst ensuring resilience within the officer cohort.**

Reasons for recommendations

4. Scrutiny is a statutory requirement for all Local Authorities as per the Local Government Act (2000). It is the primary opportunity for councillors who are not part of the council's executive to play an influential role in the shaping of policy and decisions that will have a real benefit on behalf of the community they represent. It is an essential part of

ensuring that local government remains transparent and accountable, resulting in improved public policies, services and outcomes.

5. In February 2023 Somerset County Council considered and agreed a series of recommendations proposed by a cross-party, cross-scrutiny Task and Finish Group. The recommendations followed an intense piece of work in December 2022 and January 2023, following a tasking to work with the County Council's then 4 Scrutiny Committees to establish views, suggestions and ultimately formal recommendations on how the scrutiny function should operate at Somerset Council post Vesting Day
6. One of the 7 recommendations set out that the 5 scrutiny chairs within the Somerset Council structure would conduct a review of the scrutiny function within 12 months of Vesting Day and report back to scrutiny and Full Council. This report documents the first stage of that process.
7. The 5 scrutiny chairs convened with the scrutiny manager on several occasions in February and March 2024 and have formulated 10 recommendations, which were considered and supported by the Corporate and Resources Scrutiny Committee on 25 April 2024 and are intended for presentation at Full Council in May 2024.

Other options considered:

8. Detailed consideration has been given over the past few months regarding the structure of the scrutiny function and how best to support the administration in very challenging circumstances for the Council. In light of anticipated change in Council structures and services, it was considered prescient to conduct a more detailed review later in 2024 or early 2025.

Links to Council Plan and Medium-Term Financial Plan

9. The recommendations within the report support the Council Plan's, however have no specific bearing on the medium-term financial plan.

Financial and Risk Implications

10. There are no additional financial implications from the series of recommendations.
11. There is a corporate risk in the Council having insufficient scrutiny of the decision and policy making process, which these recommendations intend to mitigate, in addition to the scrutiny processes already established.

<p>Please enter risk description: Insufficient and untimely member scrutiny of Council Executive's decision and policy making process.</p>

Likelihood	2	Impact	4	Risk Score	8
Please enter mitigation here: Continued commitment to the Council's current scrutiny model and approach to improving the scrutiny function.					

Legal Implications

12. There are no legal implications as a result of these recommendations.

HR Implications

13. There are no HR implications associated with this report.

Other Implications:

Equalities Implications

14. Somerset Councils Equalities Manger has confirmed there are no implications associated with this report.

Community Safety Implications

15. There are no community safety implications associated with this report.

Climate Change and Sustainability Implications

16. The recommendations within this report do not have any potential impact (positive or negative) on climate change and sustainability implications.

Health and Safety Implications

17. There are no health and safety implications as a result of this report and the recommendations within.

Health and Wellbeing Implications

18. There are no health and wellbeing implications as a result of this report.

Social Value

19. Not applicable.

Scrutiny comments / recommendations:

20. Summarise any comments or recommendations that the relevant Scrutiny Committee made on your proposed decision. OR alternatively state that the proposed decision has not been considered by a Scrutiny Committee.

Background

21. At the first meeting of the scrutiny review the Chairs agreed to work by consensus and not appoint an overall review chair. Following a detailed discussion it was also agreed that this was an appropriate time to conduct a light-touch review with the on-going uncertainty facing the Council and the medium term prospect of service re-alignment. The Chairs also agreed that they have found the regular meetings with the Vice Chairs and scrutiny manager of considerable benefit and wish for these to continue.
22. The first review meeting concluded that the cross-party, cross-scrutiny reaction and debate to the initial budget saving proposal of reducing the scrutiny committees from 5 to 3, demonstrated that the current scrutiny structure was appropriate and working well and should remain as is until the next review is conducted.
23. At the group's second meeting, there was discussion about committee engagement and several of the chairs reflected that there was at least 1 member on each of their committees whose attendance or engagement at the meetings was not sufficiently strong or consistent. The discussion also reflected that there has been an inconsistent and sometimes ad hoc approach to substitutes, which the Chairs were keen to address in discussions with the Group Leaders and for the scrutiny manager to explore the possible feasibility of named substitutes.
24. The group's third meeting provided them with the opportunity to reflect on agendas and reports. There was a consensus that with meetings having been on an 8-week cycle (likely to move to a 6-week cycle during 24/25) that formal committee time was too valuable to consider only the most critical information reports. An approach to dealing with information items was suggested by a scrutiny chair, which involves reports being circulated between formal meetings and then reflected on the next formal agenda for any specific member comments, was agreed as a best practice for all of the scrutiny committees to adopt.
25. This meeting also included a discussion about the perception that scrutiny can sometimes feel like a 'rubber stamping' exercise for officers and that the chairs and wider committee were keen for the purpose of all reports coming to scrutiny to be clearly identifiable and also to set exactly where they would like scrutiny to add value and engage in one of their core functions of policy development. It was agreed this could be better achieved by a revised report template that clearly highlighted this information and made the process easier for both the committee and presenters.

26. As part of the review discussions the scrutiny Chairs wished to have their appreciation noted of the democratic services support they receive. There was consensus that a consistent scrutiny staffing allocation was proving hugely beneficial, however the group requested that even with acknowledging the current financial climate a full complement of the scrutiny resource, agreed by Council in February 2023, would only improve the work of the committees further. The previously agreed dedicated scrutiny staffing resource was to consist of a minimum of 1 x Service Manager, 1 x Governance Specialist/Team Leader, 2 x Committee clerks and 2 x Scrutiny Researchers. This would allow for much more effective and efficient scrutiny and greatly increase scrutiny opportunities, whilst ensuring resilience within the officer cohort.

Background Papers

27. Somerset Council's Constitution

Report of Scrutiny at Somerset Council Task and Finish Group 20 January 2023
Local Government Acts 1972 and 2000

Assurance checklist

	Officer Name	Date Completed
Legal & Governance Implications	David Clark	Sent 01/05/24
Communications	Peter Elliott	Sent 01/05/24
Finance & Procurement	Nicola Hix	Sent 01/05/24
Executive Director / Senior Manager	Scott Wooldridge	01/05/24
Strategy & Performance	Alyn Jones	Sent 02/05/24
Executive Lead Member	n/a	n/a
Consulted:	Councillor Name	
Local Division Members	n/a	n/a
Opposition Spokesperson	n/a	n/a
Scrutiny Chair	Cllrs Dimery, Filmer, Redman, Slocombe and Wren	30/4/24