

# Scrutiny Strategy and Action Plan 2024



## **Introduction:**

This document aims to continue the development and refinement of Scrutiny practice and undertaking at Devon County Council. Devon County Council has a well-developed approach to Scrutiny and has a culture that already embeds many of the pillars that are documented in the 2019 Scrutiny Statutory Guidance.

This document has been developed through the iterative review of Scrutiny undertaken by the Governance Review in the closing months of 2023. The Governance Review has considered the statutory nature and legal stipulations of Scrutiny, they have reviewed the previous action plan and the statutory guidance. The Governance Review has also looked at the governance mistakes that challenged Councils have made. Combined with input and thoughts from the Chairs and Vice Chairs of Scrutiny group. There are five strands to the strategy, backed with actions and success measures detailed against each:

- 1. Scrutiny contributing to the good governance of the Council**
- 2. Planning work for maximum impact**
- 3. Public awareness and participation in Scrutiny**
- 4. Effective practice for Successful Scrutiny**
- 5. Quality Evidence Gathering sessions for Policy Development**

## **Objective**

To strengthen the accountability, transparency, and efficiency of Devon County Council's operations while fostering public trust and engagement, with an emphasis on public participation, an understanding of the importance of effective governance and critical friend challenge through good Scrutiny. It is important to place the whole strategy against the principle of all Scrutiny being led by Scrutiny Members.

## **Review**

It is envisaged that once adopted by the Council, this paper, and the working practices it promotes should be regularly reviewed and evaluated by the Chairs and Vice Chairs Group and that on an annual basis full Council should review progress.

## Key documents

- Centre for Public Scrutiny 'Good Scrutiny Guide' June 2019 <https://www.cfps.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/CfPS-Good-Scrutiny-Guidev2.pdf>
- LGIU Briefing: 'Creating a challenge culture? New statutory guidance on overview and Scrutiny' <https://www.lgiu.org.uk/briefing/creating-a-challenge-culture-new-statutory-guidance-on-overview-and-Scrutiny/>
- MHCLG 'Overview and Scrutiny: statutory guidance for councils and combined authorities' <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/overview-and-Scrutiny-statutory-guidance-for-councils-and-combined-authorities>

## Timeliness

The chart below has suggested phases when each action point could be focussed upon. However, these are not all bounded by the exact phase, and many actions are already in place and underway. The focus on phases is as much a guide for the chairs and vice chairs group to review progress and take action as needed. With the suggested phases the start point will be January 2024, giving the following:

Phase 1	Jan – March
Phase 2	April – June
Phase 3	July – September
Phase 4	September - December

Each action under the strategic headings are ordered by phase in the table.

At the conclusion of the year it is suggested that the Chairs and Vice Chairs of Scrutiny group refresh the action plan and plan the following years taking in to account progress that has been made.

*(The term 'Scrutiny' is here used to represent the longer 'overview and Scrutiny' with recognition that pre-decision and direction setting Scrutiny offers more value to good governance than reductive criticism after a decision has been taken.)*

## 1. Scrutiny contributing to the good governance of the Council

Action	Timing/phases	Success Measures:
1.1 Host bi-annual Chairs and Vice Chairs meetings with the Leader, CEX and Monitoring Officer to ensure collaboration and engagement between Cabinet and Scrutiny, supporting parity of esteem.	Phase 1: 0-3 months and phase 3: 6-9 months March/Sept	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Increased frequency of collaborative initiatives between Cabinet and Scrutiny.</li> <li>- Positive feedback from Chairs, Vice Chairs, and the Leader on the effectiveness of the meetings.</li> <li>- Evidence of joint projects or actions resulting from collaborative discussions.</li> <li>- Scrutiny's voice being listened to, respected, and upheld in Cabinet decisions.</li> </ul>
1.2 Improve awareness of the Full Council in the work of Scrutiny by presenting the output of task groups and spotlight reviews in engaging and succinct ways.	Phase 2: 3-6 months Annual Council Meeting May	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Presenting the Annual Report to Council to share the impact of Scrutiny activities.</li> <li>- Utilisation of presented information and task group findings in Full Council discussions or decision-making processes.</li> <li>- Positive feedback and understanding from Full Council members on the clarity and engagement level of presented task group and spotlight review outputs.</li> </ul>
1.3 Improved alignment between Scrutiny activities and corporate plan priorities as detailed in the Scrutiny annual report.	Phase 3: 6-9 months Reporting at Annual Council Meeting May	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Clear documentation in the Scrutiny annual report showcasing how Scrutiny activities align with specific corporate plan priorities.</li> <li>- Observable instances where Scrutiny recommendations or findings have contributed to tangible improvements in corporate plan priorities and achievement of best value.</li> <li>- Positive feedback from senior management on the relevance and impact of Scrutiny activities in supporting the corporate plan.</li> </ul>
1.4 Enhance impartial advice and foster an independent mindset among Scrutiny members by contracting Subject Specialist Scrutiny Advisors.	Ongoing – this is already in action however the measures should be enhanced in phase 2: 3-6 months and beyond.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Observable instances where advice from Subject Specialist Scrutiny Advisors has supported Scrutiny discussions or recommendations.</li> <li>- Scrutiny members actively seeking advice from Subject Specialist Scrutiny Advisors, indicating trust and reliance.</li> <li>- Adapt approach used to get the best from the expertise of the special advisers as needed.</li> </ul>

## 2. Planning work for maximum impact

Action	Timing/phases	Success Measures:
2.1 Committee agendas to be focused and active.	Phase 1-4: ongoing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Communicate and reinforce the expectation that Cabinet Members provide brief introductions, leaving detailed responses to officers during questioning.</li> <li>- Prohibit items for information or noting, ensuring that all reports have actionable recommendations. Updates or items for information only, being provided to Scrutiny Members outside of Committee either in Masterclasses or by way of briefings.</li> <li>- All Members can add items to the agenda, but these should be considered under the work programme under most circumstances.</li> </ul>
2.2 Develop the Work Program on an annual basis enough flexibility to include issues as they arise.	Phase 2: 3-6 months Between the March and June Committee meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Timely development and publication of the annual work program.</li> <li>- Scrutiny being cited early in the policy development process across the Council.</li> <li>- Observable instances where the work program demonstrates flexibility and adaptability.</li> </ul>
2.3 Using Evaluation Tools to Focus and Prioritise Work:	Phase 2: 3-6 months With success measures ongoing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Regular use of evaluation tools to assess the effectiveness and impact of Scrutiny activities.</li> <li>- Fewer in-depth topics being looked at each Committee meeting. Best practice is 2 substantive issues per committee.</li> <li>- Positive feedback from Scrutiny members on the clarity and usefulness of evaluation tools.</li> </ul>
2.4 Using Management Information to Direct Valuable Work:	Phase 2: 3-6 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Management information, including risk, performance, and feedback, guides the selection of Scrutiny topics.</li> <li>- Training on the understanding and interpretation of performance and risk.</li> <li>- Clear discussion at Chairs and Vice Chairs of how different formats contribute to good Scrutiny and governance.</li> </ul>

2.5 Balancing the different approaches to Scrutiny to add the most value	Phase 3: 6-9 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Annual reports and routine information being provided in SOGs/Masterclasses or briefing documents.</li> <li>- Active programme of task groups and Spotlight Review work to bring evidence-based recommendations to change to Committee and Cabinet.</li> <li>- Members understanding the role and value of different approaches in contributing to good Scrutiny and good governance.</li> </ul>
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### 3. Public awareness and participation in Scrutiny

Action	Timing/phases	Success Measures:
3.1 Collaborate with the internal communications team to increase awareness of the role and value of Scrutiny among internal colleagues and senior leaders.	Phase 1: 0-3 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Increased awareness and understanding of the role and value of Scrutiny among internal colleagues.</li> <li>- Observable instances where internal communications contribute to improved collaboration between different departments.</li> </ul>
3.2 The Scrutiny team to work with the communications team to ensure awareness of newsworthy items coming from Scrutiny, including Scrutiny members highlighting upcoming items of interest.	Phase 2: 3-6 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Regular communication (monthly meetings) between the Scrutiny team and the communications team to identify and highlight upcoming items of interest.</li> <li>- Evidence of increased mentions or coverage of Scrutiny-related topics in local media.</li> <li>- Positive feedback on the effectiveness of collaboration.</li> <li>- Continued proactive engagement with the public, even when issues are uncomfortable, to avoid one-sided narratives in the local press. Measured through the Scrutiny Annual report.</li> </ul>
3.3 Ensure local democratic accountability is upheld.	Phase 2: 3-6 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Reviewing the number of members of the public who have had contact with Scrutiny through the Annual report process.</li> </ul>

3.4 Work with the Comms team to produce and publicise news items about Scrutiny review outcomes.	Phase 3: 6-9 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Increased number of news items produced and published about Scrutiny review outcomes.</li> <li>- Positive coverage and visibility of Scrutiny review outcomes in local media.</li> <li>- Feedback from the public indicating better awareness of Scrutiny activities through news coverage.</li> <li>- Satisfaction from Committee and Task Group Chairs about media coverage in task groups and spotlight reviews.</li> </ul>
3.5 Seek ways in which the public can be involved in the selection of topics for Scrutiny.	Phase 3: 6-9 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Increased participation of the public in suggesting and selecting topics for Scrutiny.</li> <li>- Positive feedback from the public on the inclusivity and effectiveness of the process.</li> <li>- Observable instances where public suggestions lead to actual Scrutiny topics on the work programme, demonstrating responsiveness to public input.</li> </ul>
3.6 Increased visibility of the Statutory nature of the role of Head of Scrutiny and the team	Ongoing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Clear communication and documentation emphasising the statutory nature of the Head of Scrutiny's role.</li> <li>- Evidence of increased understanding and recognition of the statutory responsibilities in internal and external communications.</li> <li>- Head of Scrutiny to regularly attend SLT and present the Scrutiny Annual Report each year.</li> </ul>

## 4. Effective practice for Successful Scrutiny

Action	Timing/phases	Success Measures:
4.1 Ensure quality, meaningful recommendations for change are made to Cabinet, both from task groups and spotlight reviews and from Committee.	Phase 1: 0-3 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Provide further training on making SMART recommendations to Cabinet.</li> <li>- Regular documentation of recommendations made to Cabinet, highlighting their clarity and relevance.</li> <li>- Demonstrable instances where Cabinet incorporates Scrutiny recommendations into decision-making processes and policies.</li> <li>- Positive feedback from Cabinet and Scrutiny members on the quality and impact of Scrutiny recommendations.</li> </ul>
4.2 Enhancing Focus: ensuring that critical friend questions are on point and adding value.	Phase 2: 3-6 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Chairs and Vice Chairs to provide clear leadership when managing wide-ranging report topics and ensuring a focus on the primary purpose of each committee. Pulling up poor practice if it is observed.</li> <li>- Members to ask questions in Committee, rather than pontificate or make statements.</li> <li>- Reduction in parochialism by emphasising the importance of using local examples as illustrations of broader regional challenges.</li> </ul>
4.3 Strengthen chair-ship skills to guide discussions and prevent members from making statements or expressing opinions without asking questions.	Phase 3: 6-9 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Improved guidance and direction during discussions as evidenced by meeting minutes.</li> <li>- Observable instances where the Chair effectively redirects discussions to align with Scrutiny objectives.</li> <li>- Alignment of approaches between Committees.</li> <li>- Chairs and Vice Chairs group reviewing the effectiveness of chairing practices.</li> </ul>
4.4 All Councillors to actively participate in meaningful and value-added Scrutiny	Phase 4 9-12 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Realistic expectations communicated with Members about the commitments of bring on Scrutiny - namely that not all Members of a Committee can or will wish to attend every masterclass, but that taking advantage of the knowledge and awareness sessions provided is important to the role of Scrutiny.</li> <li>- All Members to be encouraged to actively participate in Scrutiny, including sitting on task groups/spotlight review and asking questions in committee meetings.</li> </ul>

## 5. Quality Evidence Gathering sessions for Policy Development

Action	Timing/phases	Success Measures:
5.1 Continue to run professional task groups and spotlight reviews, including making provision for psychological safety of witnesses.	Ongoing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Completion of professional task groups and spotlight reviews within established timelines.</li> <li>- Positive feedback from participants, including witnesses, on the experience of psychological safety during Scrutiny processes.</li> <li>- Including in the scoping document for each review with a statement of anticipated impact/understanding about why the Committee has prioritised this piece of work.</li> </ul>
5.2 Maintain site visits, where appropriate, to increase awareness of issues and services.	Ongoing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Regular documentation/reporting of site visits and their contribution to increased awareness of issues and services, using infographics.</li> <li>- Positive feedback from participants on the value and impact of site visits.</li> <li>- Observable instances where insights gained from site visits inform Scrutiny discussions and recommendations.</li> </ul>
5.3 Continue to hear and listen to the voice of the public.	Taking dedicated steps Phase 2: 3-6 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Taking opportunities to engage with groups and individuals to provide colour and depth for Scrutiny reviews.</li> </ul>
5.4 Maintain professionalism and rigor in both primary and secondary research.	Ongoing but with targeted approach Phase 3-4: 6-12 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Consistent adherence to professional standards in both primary and secondary research.</li> <li>- Feedback from Scrutiny members on the quality and reliability of research conducted.</li> <li>- Triangulation of data points, sources and research methodologies.</li> <li>- Research findings demonstrably contribute to Scrutiny recommendations.</li> </ul>
5.5 Reviewing recommendations to assess impact	Ongoing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Systematic tracking and documentation of Scrutiny recommendations over time.</li> <li>- Observable instances where Scrutiny recommendations have led to tangible changes or improvements.</li> <li>- Positive feedback from relevant stakeholders (internal or external) on the effectiveness and impact of Scrutiny recommendations.</li> <li>- Inclusion of impact assessment reports as part of the regular reporting mechanisms, demonstrating a commitment to accountability and continuous improvement.</li> </ul>