



**WEST OXFORDSHIRE
DISTRICT COUNCIL**

WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Name and date of Committee	OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 16 APRIL 2025
Subject	OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY SELF-ASSESSMENT
Wards affected	None
Accountable member	Councillor Andrew Beaney, Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee Email: Andrew.beaney@westoxon.gov.uk
Accountable officer	Andrew Brown, Head of Democratic and Electoral Services Email: democratic.services@westoxon.gov.uk
Report author	Ana Prelici, Senior Democratic Services Officer Email: democratic.services@westoxon.gov.uk
Summary/Purpose	To present the findings of a self-assessment survey carried out to evaluate the effectiveness of the transition from a structure of three overview and scrutiny committees to a single Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
Annexes	Annex A – Survey Results Annex B – Meeting Attendance
Recommendation(s)	That Overview and Scrutiny resolves to: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Note the report and the recommendation from the Constitution Working Group to the annual meeting of full Council on 21 May 2025 to reduce the Committee's size to 15 members.2. Endorse the Officer suggestions for improvement based on the survey feedback and agree any additional improvements.
Corporate priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Working Together for West Oxfordshire
Key Decision	NO
Exempt	NO

Consultees/ Consultation	Management team Constitution Working Group
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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1** This report presents the findings of a self-assessment survey conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of the transition from three Overview and Scrutiny Committees to a single Overview and Scrutiny Committee. It also identifies areas for further improvements.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1** Councils that operate executive arrangements are required to have at least one overview and scrutiny committee. Overview and scrutiny committees are empowered to review and scrutinise decisions taken by the Council and to investigate and make reports on any matters which affect the district or its inhabitants. The Council's Overview and Scrutiny Rules (Constitution Part 5C) state that:
Scrutiny Committees should not be regarded primarily as an "appeals mechanism" to overturn or amend specific decisions (although they may, if they see fit, ask the Executive, the Council or another Committee to reconsider a decision); rather their function is to raise issues for consideration, to examine the intent and effectiveness of policy, to hold the Executive to account, and to represent the interests and views of the public within the Council.
- 2.2** In November 2023, Full Council resolved to replace the three previous Overview and Scrutiny Committees (Climate and Environment, Economic and Social, Finance and Management) with a single committee. The aim of this change was to properly embed pre-decision scrutiny as part of the Executive decision-making process; ensure effective scheduling of meetings; and to facilitate effective work planning and improve efficiency (e.g. by reducing duplication).
- 2.3** Members and Officers were surveyed to assess the effectiveness of the move to a single committee and identify future improvements to the function.

3. SURVEY APPROACH AND RATIONALE

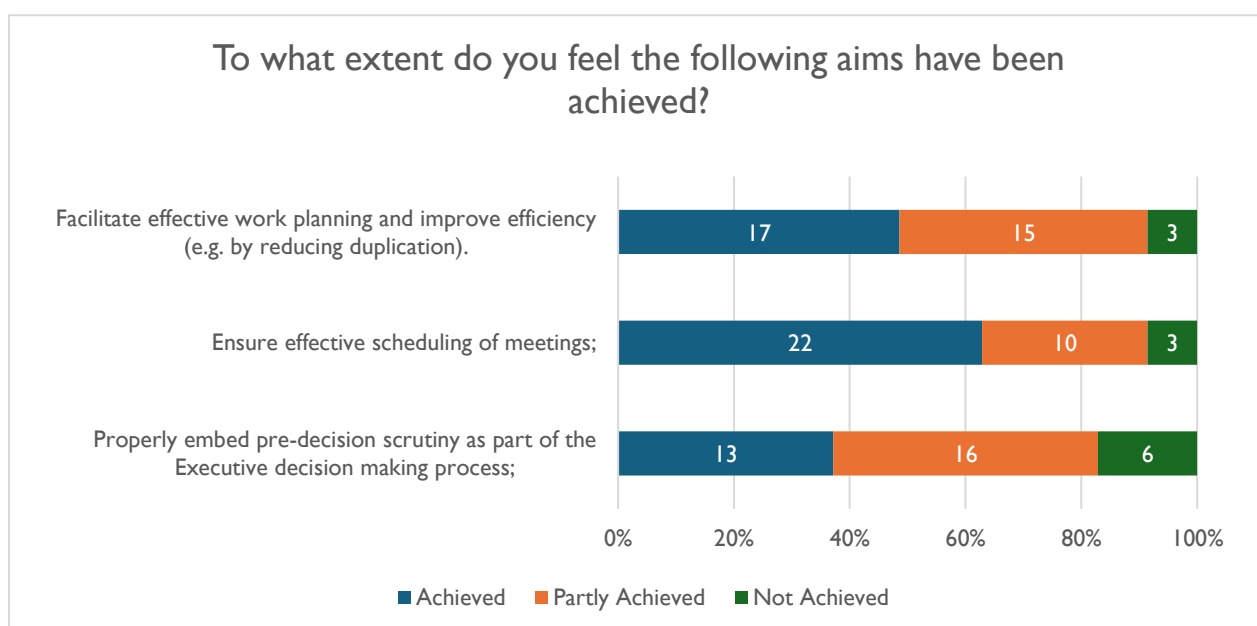
- 3.1** A questionnaire was sent out to all members of the Council, as well as Directors, Heads of Service and officers with experience of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee at West Oxfordshire District Council. The questions asked within the survey are at Annex A and were partially based on the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny's characteristics of effective scrutiny. The questionnaire also included questions aimed at seeking general views on the effectiveness of the Committee.

4. SURVEY RESULTS

- 4.1** The survey was completed by 35 respondents, of whom 23 were Councillors (14 Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 5 Executive Members and 4 other Councillors) and 12 were Officers. Below is a summary of the results of the survey, the full results can be found at Annex A.

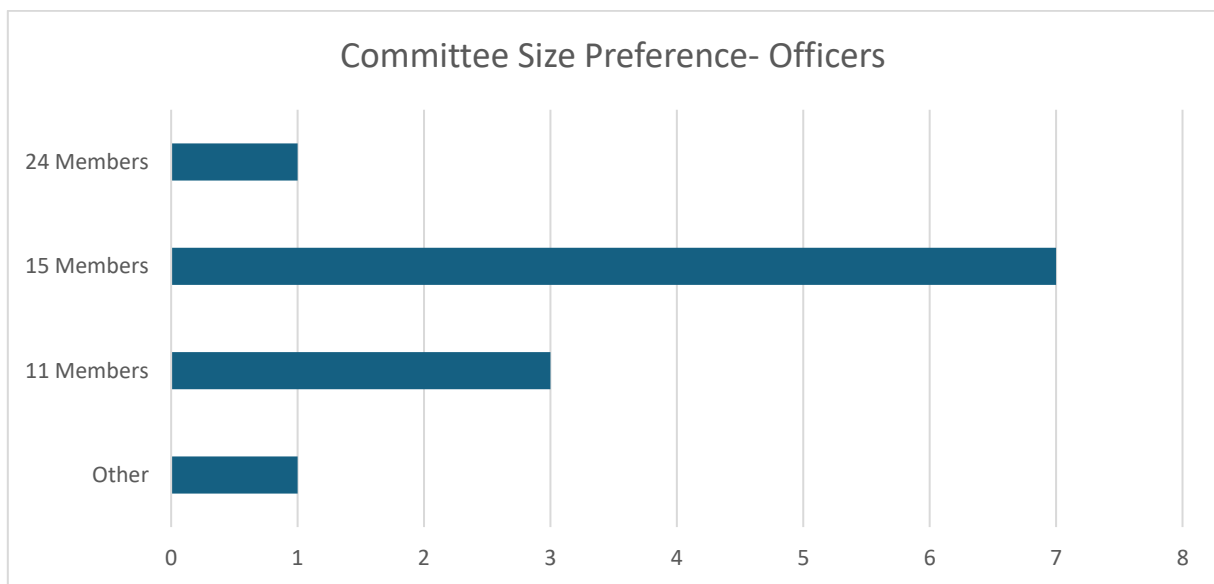
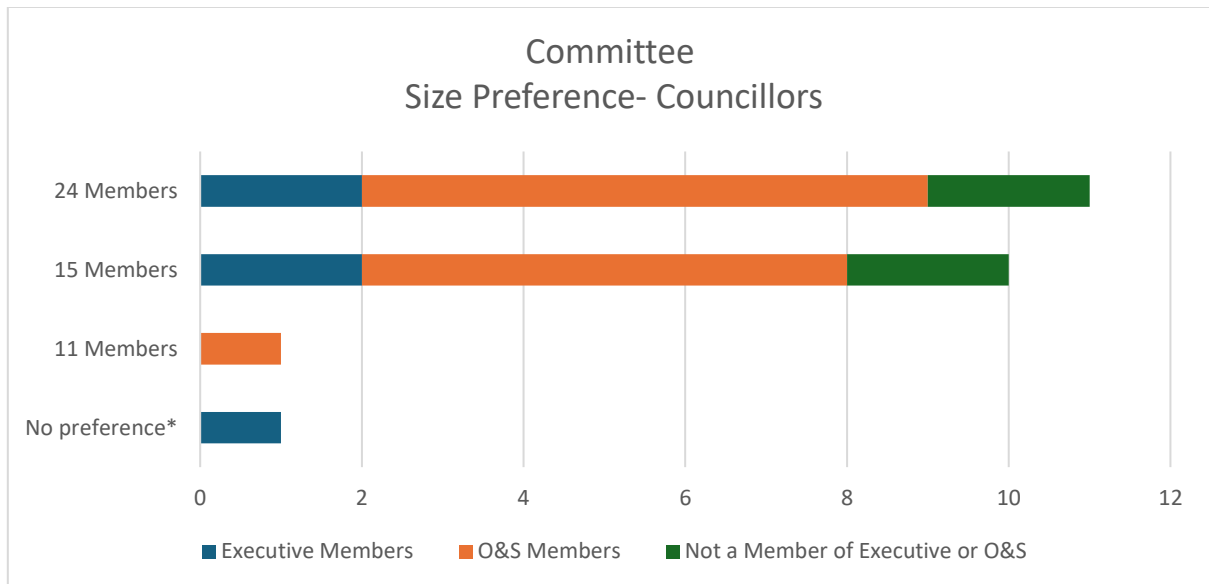
4.2 To assess whether or not the move to a single committee had been successful, respondents were asked to reflect on the original aims of this change. Out of 35 respondents, most felt that the aims of moving to a single committee had been achieved or partially achieved:

- Properly embed pre-decision scrutiny as part of the Executive decision-making process; 83% felt that the move to a single committee had either partially or fully achieved this.
- Ensure effective scheduling of meetings; 91% felt that the move to a single committee had either partially or fully achieved this.
- Facilitate effective work planning and improve efficiency (e.g. by reducing duplication); 91% felt that the move to a single committee had either partially or fully achieved this



4.3 The current membership of the Committee is 24 members, which is significantly above average for an Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Respondents to the survey were asked to rate the optimum size of the Committee, between a choice of 11 members, 15 members, 24 members or 'other'.¹

¹ The 'other' option was a free text box. One Councillor responded to say "either version can work" and one officer answered to say "small and topic dependent" the graphs on the next page vary for this reason.



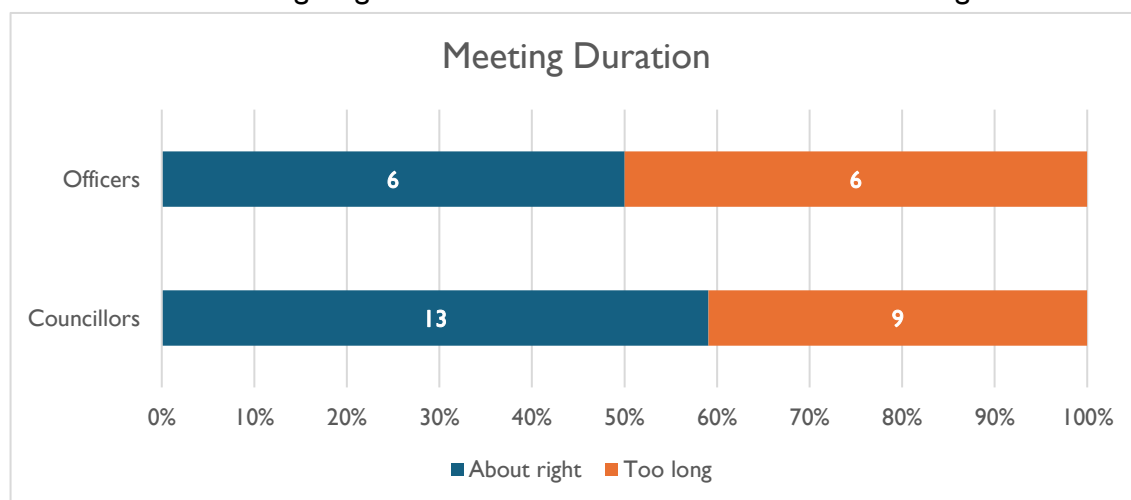
- 4.3.1** Most officers who responded to the survey preferred a smaller committee, with 58% answering that 15 members was the optimum size, and 25% officers answering that 11 members was the optimum size. 18% (one officer) preferred the existing size of 24 members, and 18% (one officer) answered “other” as detailed in the annex.
- 4.3.2** There was no overall preference between the existing committee and a smaller committee size from members who responded to the survey. 48% of members (11 members) who responded preferring the existing size of 24 members, 43% of members (10 members) preferring a reduced size of 15 members, and one member (4%) preferring a reduced size of 11 members.
- 4.3.3** Members and officers were asked to reflect on the answers they provided above and explain why they would prefer a smaller or larger committee. Reasons for maintaining the committee size that were given by respondents included that a larger committee allowed more members to participate and allowed for more expertise and a range of viewpoints

on the Committee. Reasons that were raised for reducing the size of the Committee included that the Committee at its current size was too large for effective participation and discussion, and that this meant that only a small number of members were engaged at meetings. In the view of some respondents, a smaller committee would also be easier to administer and make it easier for members to attend (as some felt their schedule was stretched) and find substitute members.

4.4 The average duration of Overview and Scrutiny Committee meetings was 1 hour and 55 minutes. Respondents were asked to state whether this duration was too short, too long or about right. 57% of Members thought that meetings were about the right length while 39% thought they were too long. 50% of Officers who responded to the survey thought the duration of the meetings was too long, while 50% thought this was about right.

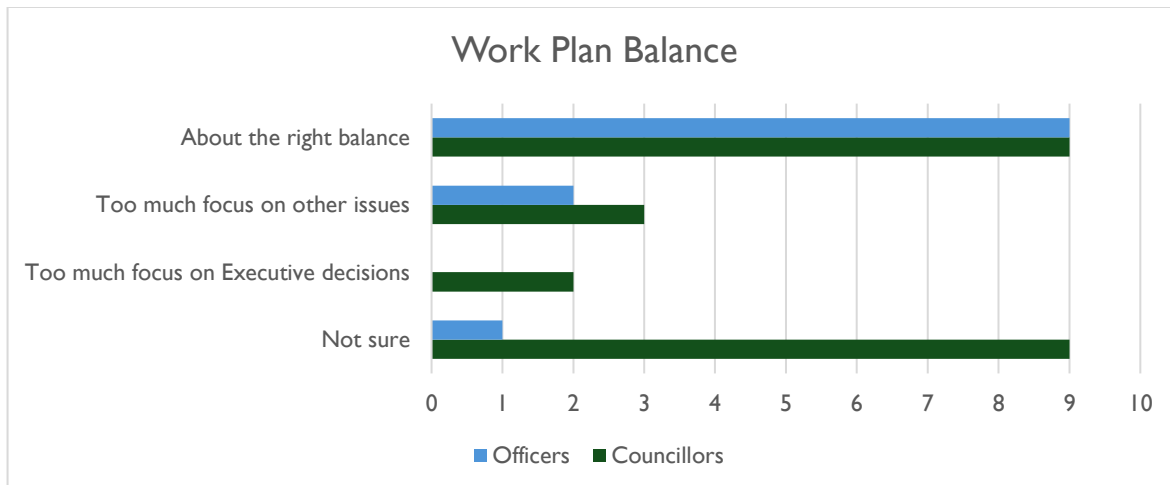
4.4.1 Respondents were asked to comment on the length of meetings. Neither members nor officers raised major concerns about the duration of meetings, but it was felt that extending the meetings past the average of two hours was not necessary and reduced the quality of meeting. Full responses and a summary are provided at Annex A.

4.4.2 The maximum meeting length in the Council's Constitution limits meetings to three hours.



4.5 Respondents were asked which layout they preferred for meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Most members (52%) and some officers (25%) did not have a preference, but of the remaining members and officers, there was a preference for a board room style layout in the committee rooms.

4.6 Respondents were asked whether the work plan achieved the right balance between focusing on pre-decision scrutiny of Executive decisions and other issues which are important to members and the district. A number of members were uncertain but most members and officers who responded stated that the work plan achieved largely the right balance. In the further comments section, it was suggested that the Committee should be more proactive in identifying other issues and fitting these around pre-decision scrutiny.



- 4.6.1** One member suggested that members of the Committee could benefit from further training, to better understand the Committee’s function in holding the Executive to account as a critical friend, and in particular the link between the Executive’s Forward Plan and the Committee’s work plan.
- 4.6.2** It was also stated that officer-led, PowerPoint-based presentations were not the best use of the Committee’s time as there was a limited amount to scrutinise on these.
- 4.6.3** There were some comments stating that the previous way of operating the Committee (i.e. three committees) was better, though the responses in 4.2 indicated that most respondents felt that the move to a single committee has at least partially achieved the intended aims.
- 4.6.4** It was suggested that task and finish groups could be greater utilised by the Committee as this could allow the Committee to scrutinise topics in depth without extending the length of Committee meetings.
- 4.7** Respondents were asked to rate whether or not they agree that the Committee achieves the following, based on the characteristics for Effective Scrutiny from the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny;
- Has a clearly defined and valued role in the Council’s governance arrangements
 - Operates non-politically
 - Committee Members have the training and development opportunities they need
 - Receives high quality information and reports from officers
 - Holds Executive Members to account
 - Holds Senior Officers to account
 - Encourages public participation
 - Builds trust and good relationships with internal and external stakeholders.
- 4.7.2** Generally, most respondents agreed with the statements that the Committee “has a clearly defined role and valued role in the Council’s governance arrangements”, “receives

high quality information and reports from officers”, and that “meetings and activities are well planned.”

- 4.7.3 Officers largely agreed that most of the criteria above were largely being met, with the exception that “Committee Members have the training and development opportunities needed”, and that “the Committee operates non-politically” which were identified as areas for improvement.
- 4.7.4 The areas for improvement identified from Councillor responses were “Encourages public participation”, “holds Senior Officers to account”, “holds Executive Members to account”, as well as the two criteria also raised by the officer responses as above - “Committee Members have the training and development opportunities needed” and “the Committee operates non-politically”.
- 4.7.5 Further feedback provided on these characteristics also identified that more training was needed, especially for new Councillors. There were concerns raised about presentation-based items, which limited the Committee’s available time available to scrutinise issues, as well as difficulty scrutinising the impact of policies without measurable outcomes. It was also considered that Executive Members could play a more prominent role at meetings.
- 4.7.6 One member raised that the meeting time could be reviewed, a 5:30pm start time made it difficult for them to attend meetings.
- 4.8 A box was also provided for respondents to provide any other suggestions for improvement. Key themes highlighted include better utilisation of work planning sessions, more training, and greater use of task and finish groups.
- 4.9 One officer described the atmosphere at committee meetings as ‘unpleasant’. While it is not clear how widespread this experience is, the Committee should be mindful that more junior report authors are not made to feel ‘put on the spot’, focussing on scrutinising the decisions of the Executive and senior officers. This is something that could also potentially be dealt with through further training.

5. FEEDBACK FROM THE CONSTITUTION WORKING GROUP

- 5.1 The Constitution Working Group considered an earlier version of this report on 26 March 2025, and prompted by the suggestion to do so within the report looked at the following issues;
 - 5.1.1 **Reduce the size of the Committee**
 - 5.1.2 The survey results showed that 50% of members and 82% of Officers supported reducing the Committee’s size. This was discussed by the CWG, who agreed unanimously that the Committee size should be reduced to 15 members for the following reasons;
 - i. A smaller Committee would make it easier for members to find substitutes, and for officers to administer.
 - ii. The CWG agreed with the observation raised in the survey that the Committee’s size was not conducive to inclusive discussions, and did not enable all members to participate to the extent that they might wish to.

- iii. A smaller Committee would lead to a loss of expertise on the Committee itself, but this could be mitigated through the greater use of task and finish groups. Task and finish groups would be required to regularly report to the Committee. Unlike a sub-committee, the members of task and finish groups would not need to sit on the 'parent' committee, so long as its Chair is on the Committee (to provide a clear reporting line and accountability). The greater use of task and finish groups would provide a way for more of the Council's members to participate in scrutiny activities if they wish to.

- 5.1.3 The size of 15 members was agreed by the CWG as it was the more popular choice with survey respondents who preferred a smaller committee. It was felt 11 members would be too small.

The CWG resolved to recommend to Full Council that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee be reduced to 15 members.

5.2 Returning to a three-committee structure

- 5.2.1 Several members commented that the single Overview and Scrutiny Committee does not operate as effectively as the three committees it replaced. The responses in the survey largely indicated that the move to a single Committee has at least partially achieved the intended aims. While further work is needed in some areas, for instance in ensuring that Executive Members are more accountable to the Committee (as opposed to officers being held to account), and that there is greater input from Committee Members in work planning, suggestions below should help address concerns with the single Committee.
- 5.2.2 The CWG considered the option of returning to a three-committee structure but did not think it would be preferable to do this, instead favouring improvements to the single-committee model. The CWG considered that a greater use of task and finish groups would allow the Scrutiny function to look at issues in more depth but that the membership of these could be expertise-based and flexible.

5.3 Training

- 5.4 The CWG also endorsed the officer recommendation for further training (6.2).

6. OFFICER SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVING EFFECTIVENESS OF THE COMMITTEE

- 6.1 The following improvements could be implemented by Officers or by Officers with the agreement of the Committee.

6.2 Training

- 6.2.1 Further training for Committee Members will be organised in response to the need for this that was raised by several respondents to the survey.
- 6.2.2 The Council has previously used the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny to provide Scrutiny Essentials training. That session was well received but was poorly attended and there has been a significant turnover of Members since scrutiny training was last offered. This year it is intended to offer Scrutiny Essentials training followed separately by Questioning Skills training.

6.3 Work Planning

- 6.3.1** One of the issues highlighted was that although there is a reasonably good balance between pre-decision scrutiny items and other important issues, members do not feel that they have an ability to feed into the Committee's work plan. The Committee's work plan is reviewed at every meeting but normally towards the end of the meeting without much detailed discussion. A work planning session, involving the Committee Members, key officers and Executive Members has been scheduled for the April Committee meeting.
- 6.3.2** Officers will present a suggested work plan, including suggested task and finish groups, to the 16 April 2025 meeting but there is scope for the Committee's Members to take advice from officers and identify areas of importance to them and to add or remove items. In doing so the Committee is advised to have regard to the TOPIC criteria (timely, organisational priority, public interest, influence, cost).
- 6.3.3** Officers would recommend that members leave some capacity on the work plan to allow the ability to look at new issues as and when they arise throughout the year.

6.4 Greater use of task and finish groups

- 6.4.1** Several suggestions were made about increasing the use of task and finish groups. The Committee could review areas that it wishes to focus on and consider any task and finish groups (also known as review groups or working groups) that it wishes to establish.
- 6.4.2** To encourage the implementation of task and finish groups and to ensure that they feed back to the main Committee, it would be good practice for a standing item to be added to Committee agendas for updates from task and finish groups.

6.5 Discouraging the use of officer-led, slideshow-based presentations

- 6.5.1** There were references to the use of officer-led, slideshow-based presentations which members felt did not enable discussion or effective scrutiny, particularly where the content is not made available in advance. Democratic Services will liaise with officers to continue to discourage the use of presentations at Committee meetings for items which would be better delivered as member briefings instead.

6.6 Encouraging Executive Members to present items

- 6.6.1** Executive Members have been encouraged to present items and this should continue.
- 6.6.2** Improved engagement between the Executive and Overview and Scrutiny Committee could also be encouraged by holding regular meetings between the Leader and the Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
- 6.6.3** The Council's Overview and Scrutiny Rules (Constitution Part 5C) state that the Committee will "receive reports from the Leader at its first meeting after each annual Council meeting on the Executive's priorities for the coming year and its performance in the previous year". This will assist the Committee with holding the Executive to account and help to foster a more productive relationship between Scrutiny and the Executive.

7. FURTHER OPTION

7.1 Change the meeting time

- 7.1.1** It was suggested by one member that the meeting start time of 5:30pm is not working but it is unclear how widespread this opinion is. The Council Procedure Rules (Constitution Part 5A) provide that “the timing of meetings will be agreed by the respective Council Committees and Sub-Committees at their first meeting of the civic year”.

8. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 8.1** This report sets out a number of options for improving or changing the Council’s Overview and Scrutiny Committee for consideration by Members.
- 8.2** Doing nothing is not recommended given that the survey has provided lots of feedback and ideas and the Council should seek to continuously improve how it operated.

9. CONCLUSIONS

- 9.1** The survey results show that the Committee is overall functioning effectively but that further improvements could be made in ensuring that Executive Members lead on items and reducing the role of officers in presenting items.

10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1** There are no financial implications arising from the recommendations in this report. The planned scrutiny training can be funded from the existing budget for member training.

11. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1** The Council operates executive arrangements and as such must have at least one Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The Local Government Act 2000 provides the statutory basis for overview and scrutiny committees and their powers.

12. RISK ASSESSMENT

- 12.1** There are no significant risks arising from this report.

13. EQUALITIES IMPACT

- 13.1** There are no differential impacts on groups with protected characteristics.

14. CLIMATE AND ECOLOGICAL EMERGENCIES IMPLICATIONS

- 14.1** A smaller committee would reduce the emissions from members travelling for in-person meetings, but this is likely to be negligible.

15. BACKGROUND PAPERS

None.

(END)