

REPORT TO:	SCRUTINY & OVERVIEW COMMITTEE 30 March 2021
SUBJECT:	Scrutiny Improvement Review
PERSON LEADING AT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING:	Councillor Sean Fitzsimons – Chair of Scrutiny & Overview Committee
PUBLIC/EXEMPT:	Public

CORPORATE/POLICY CONTEXT

Scrutiny is in place for the benefit of the community at large. It is designed to **support and enhance decision-making processes**. Scrutiny involves non-executive elected members reviewing and scrutinising the whole range of the council's functions and responsibilities including those delivered in partnership with other agencies and organisations. One of the main objectives of our scrutiny function is to hold the Administration to account in delivering the Corporate Plan.

ORIGIN OF ITEM:	Arising from the Governance Review, the Centre for Governance & Scrutiny (CfGS) was originally commissioned to conduct a review of the Council's scrutiny function in March 2020 which was concluded in January 2021.
BRIEF FOR THE COMMITTEE:	<p>The Scrutiny & Overview Committee is asked to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Receive and accept the findings of the CfGS Scrutiny Improvement Review, 2. Agree that the recommendation will be incorporated into the Croydon Renewal Plan, 3. Recommend to Council that the CfGS Scrutiny Improvement Review for noting, 4. Agree that Recommendations 1, 5 & 6 are prioritised for delivery. 5. Agree to commission the CfGS to develop a training programme for Scrutiny which will be incorporated into Council's overall programme for Member Learning & Development to be overseen by the Ethics Committee. 6. Work with the CfGS to develop a work programme that is focussed on the priorities of the Council and allows Scrutiny to add value to the ongoing improvement journey.

	<p>7. Agree to set up a Scrutiny Co-ordination Group to monitor and steer the scrutiny work programme.</p> <p>8. Note that an overarching Information Protocol is being developed for Members taking into account the recommendations in the CFGS Scrutiny Improvement Plan and the Croydon Renewal Plan.</p>
--	---

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1. The Centre for Governance & Scrutiny (CfGS) was commissioned to conduct a review of the scrutiny function at Croydon Council, with a view to identifying possible areas for improvement. The report from CfGS has been taken account in the Report in the Public Interest, issued by the Council's external auditor, Grant Thornton, as well as other reviews feeding into the Croydon Renewal Plan. A copy of the CfGS Scrutiny Improvement Review is attached at Appendix A to this report for the consideration and adoption of the Committee.
- 1.2. The CfGS Scrutiny Improvement Review has identified 13 recommendations for improving the delivery of the scrutiny function at the Council, which the Committee is asked to receive and accept. To ensure that the CfGS Scrutiny Improvement Review receives wider political buy-in it is also recommended that the report is referred to Council for further endorsement.
- 1.3. There will be a range of different actions needed to deliver the improvements identified in the CfGS Scrutiny Improvement Report. The remainder of the recommendations contained in this report (outlined above) will ensure that work can commence on this, including the development of a scrutiny training programme open to all members, improvements to the work programme and an acknowledgement that a new Information Protocol for Members is being prepared.

2. SCRUTINY IMPROVEMENT REVIEW

- 2.1. A review of the scrutiny function at Croydon Council was initially proposed by the Chair of the Scrutiny & Overview Committee in March 2020 as part of the wider Governance Review that was being conducted at the time. In summary, the remit of the review was to look at how scrutiny worked and the outcomes it delivered to evaluate the performance of the scrutiny function at Croydon Council and to identify possible improvements that could be implemented.
- 2.2. As the CfGS are the industry experts in conducting scrutiny reviews, they were commissioned to undertake the Croydon Scrutiny Improvement Review. In conducting their review, CfGS have interviewed key individuals, conducted a survey of Members on the scrutiny function and considered other evidence such as recordings of meetings, meeting reports and minutes.
- 2.3. The review was initially due to conclude in autumn 2020, but following the publication of the Report in the Public Interest by the Council's Auditors, Grant Thornton, which criticised the scrutiny of the Council's financial performance, CfGS was asked to re-evaluate their report in light of this new context. The revised report (attached at Appendix A) takes into account the Report in the Public Interest along with other reviews that have informed the Croydon Renewal Plan.
- 2.4. Informed by their expert understanding of best practice from other authorities, the CfGS Scrutiny Improvement Review makes 13 recommendations, which can be

found within the report with additional context. In summary the 13 recommendations are:-

- **Recommendation 1:** Take action to ensure that scrutiny can play an immediate role in the Council's financial recovery.
- **Recommendation 2:** Secure meaningful commitment to scrutiny from the executive side of the organisation.
- **Recommendation 3:** Determine scrutiny's role within the wider governance framework, particularly with regard to quarterly progress monitoring on the Council's new Action Plan.
- **Recommendation 4:** Establish a Scrutiny Co-ordination Group.
- **Recommendation 5:** Set a more consistent approach to the provision of information to scrutiny councillors.
- **Recommendation 6:** More systematic prioritisation of the work programme.
- **Recommendation 7:** Bring more focus and rigour to scrutiny in committee.
- **Recommendation 8:** Identify and act on short term member and officer training and development needs to address the above.
- **Recommendation 9:** In the medium term, scrutiny needs to be closer to commercial operations.
- **Recommendation 10:** In the medium term, take steps to expand public participation and community involvement in the work of scrutiny.
- **Recommendation 11:** In the medium term, a more robust role for scrutiny in the pre-decision scrutiny process.
- **Recommendation 12:** In the medium term, adopt a Member and Officer scrutiny development and skills programme which embeds learning opportunities into scrutiny's substantive work.
- **Recommendation 13:** Ensure cabinet member advisory committees (CMACs) and Scrutiny are co-ordinated, and that there is also co-ordination with the Council's member audit committee (GPAC).

Priority of the Recommendations

- 2.5. As responding to the financial challenge facing the Council and delivery of the Croydon Renewal Programme are key priorities for the whole organisation, it has recommended by CfGS, following conversations with the Improvement and Assurance Panel that Recommendation 1, to ensure that scrutiny can play an immediate role in the Council's financial recovery is prioritised. In delivering Recommendation 1, it is recognised that scrutiny will need to be supplied with relevant information to be able to monitor progress effectively, which is why it is also recommended that delivery of Recommendation 5 is also prioritised. Finally, given the scale of the task facing the Council, the work programme for Scrutiny will need care planning to ensure the value that can be added to the process by scrutiny is maximised. As such it is recommended that Recommendation 6 is the third recommendation prioritised for delivery.

Croydon Renewal Plan

- 2.6. To deliver all of these recommendations will take time and will require the support of the political and corporate leadership of the Council, in addition to the existing scrutiny member and officer resource. Through having the recommendations incorporated into the Croydon Renewal Plan, it will help to ensure that this wider support is in place.

Scrutiny Training Programme

- 2.7. It is proposed that CfGS be approached to develop a Scrutiny Training Programme, which will address some of the areas raised in the Scrutiny Improvement Review. Although the training programme will have a scrutiny focus, it will be open to all Members to attend and will include areas that will be of wider benefit beyond scrutiny, including questioning skills, work programming and chairing skills.

Work Programme

- 2.8. Recommendation 1 details the need to ensure that scrutiny can play an immediate role in the financial recovery of the Council and Recommendation 3 concerns the need to determine scrutiny's role within the wider governance framework, giving particular regard to Croydon's Improvement Plan. To ensure that the work programme is effectively prioritised and adds value to the improvement journey of the Council, it is recommended that the CfGS is invited to assist with planning the work programme for 2021-22. It is also recommended that CfGS is invited to work with Scrutiny to ensure that meetings are effectively focussed towards adding value to the Council.

Scrutiny Co-ordination Group

- 2.9. Recommendation 4 proposes that a Scrutiny Co-ordination Group is established. The membership of this group would include the Scrutiny Chairs and Vice-Chairs of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee and its sub-committees. The purpose of this group will be to monitor and steer the scrutiny work programme. Although it is proposed that the recommendations contained in the Scrutiny Improvement Review are incorporated into the Croydon Renewal Plan, it would provide additional oversight for the Scrutiny Co-ordination Group to receive regular updates on the implementation of the recommendations

Access to Information

- 2.10. In both the Governance Review and the Scrutiny Improvement Review, access to information was one of the key concerns of Members. This is reflected in Recommendation 5. To address these concerns an information sharing protocol is being prepared for both Members and Officers to put a structure in place for information requests by Members. It is expected that this Protocol will be created and submitted to the Ethics Committee for formal adoption by summer 2021.

Conclusion

- 2.11. The Scrutiny Improvement Review conducted by CfGS presents a measured view on the state of the scrutiny function at the Council. The recommendations suggested will deliver improvement and can be delivered within existing resources. The Committee is encouraged to accept the recommendations set out at the start of this report, so work can commence on delivery of the recommendations.

CONTACT OFFICER: *Simon Trevaskis – Senior Democratic Services & Governance Officer – Scrutiny*

Email: simon.trevaskis@croydon.gov.uk

APPENDICES TO THIS REPORT

Appendix A: CfGS Scrutiny Improvement Review

Appendix B: Draft Scrutiny & Overview Committee Work Programme 2021-22