

<p style="text-align: center;">Overview and Scrutiny Committee</p> <p style="text-align: center;">09 July 2024</p>	
<p>Report of: Afazul Hoque, Head of Strategy & Communities</p>	<p>Classification: Unrestricted</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Tower Hamlets Scrutiny Improvement Plan</p>	

Executive Summary

This report refreshes the Council’s Scrutiny Improvement Plan. The plan builds on the Committee’s existing improvement programme. It captures additional actions discussed at the Scrutiny Performance Review workshop, the Cabinet report discussed with the Chief Executive at the June OSC meeting, and the discussions from the scrutiny work programme workshop held in June. It also includes actions discussed with officers and Members from Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea.

Recommendations:

Overview & Scrutiny is recommended to:

1. Review the actions set out to strengthen the Council’s Scrutiny function and suggest further actions the Council can take to ensure Scrutiny in Tower Hamlets is effective, robust, and adds value to strategic priorities and residents' lived experiences.
2. Agree to implement the Scrutiny Improvement Plan

1 DETAILS OF THE REPORT

- 2.1. This is a comprehensive plan to enhance the scrutiny function within the Council. Delivery of the plan is a critical step towards ensuring transparency and accountability in council policy development and decision-making, as well as ensuring meaningful engagement with our community.
- 2.2. Many of the challenges facing scrutiny in Tower Hamlets are also posed to other Local Authorities across the country. Many Councils struggle with meaningful public engagement, robust financial scrutiny, and developing Members understanding of risk and other fundamental issues. Over the last 12 months the Council has focused on strengthening the Overview and

Scrutiny Function and addressing these sector-wide issues, whilst working to realign resources to better support it. Delivery of this Plan will further strengthen scrutiny and help establish this function as an exemplar.

2.3. Progress of the Scrutiny Improvement Plan will be reviewed on a 6-monthly basis. Members will have an opportunity to hold delivery of the plan to account and identify any further areas where additional action is required.

2.4. The success of this plan requires the buy-in of the Executive, Chief Executive and Corporate Management Team, and Scrutiny Members. Therefore, they have each been engaged in developing this plan to ensure they consider how they improve their contributions to scrutiny and enable it to be as effective as possible. Actions in the plan have been collated from the following:

- 1) Scrutiny Member Performance Review April 2024 – facilitated by Centre for Governance & Scrutiny (CFGGS).
- 2) Enhancing Scrutiny Cabinet Report – discussed with the Chief Executive at the June 2024 OSC meeting.
- 3) Visits to Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea Scrutiny – discussions with Scrutiny Members and officers.
- 4) Scrutiny Work Programme Workshop -19 June.

2.5. As detailed in the cabinet report, the Council believes that it should strive for exemplar status for its Scrutiny function. The Improvement plan will look to support this in the following ways:

1. **Strengthening Community Engagement.** We are committed to making it easier for residents to participate in Council decisions. We will:
 - Enhance our online scrutiny platform and ensure residents know how to get involved.
 - Hold workshops and community meetings to hear residents' views on key issues and include their thoughts in our work programming.
 - Create more opportunities for residents to provide evidence at our meetings and share their experiences.
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3. **Gathering Diverse Evidence to make informed decisions,** we will:
 - Engage a wide range of witnesses and experts to provide comprehensive insights.
 - Consider co-opting independent experts into our scrutiny committees for diverse perspectives.
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4. **Improving our Scrutiny Function, supporting it to be member-led, independent and continually aiming to improve.** We will:
 - Conduct a thorough review of our scrutiny function and implement improvements based on Member feedback and best practices.

- Ensure that all recommendations are followed up and their impacts are reported back to Scrutiny so we understand the impact scrutiny has.
5. **Enhancing Governance and Accountability.** Build a culture of openness and collaboration, where all officers and Members take accountability for their role in the success of the scrutiny function. To achieve this, we will:
 - Strengthen the role of the Statutory Scrutiny Officer, ensuring they effectively advocate for transparency.
 - Foster stronger relationships between the Council's Executive and Scrutiny bodies for better collaboration and results.
 - Ensure Cabinet Member representation for all items.
 6. **Promoting Diversity and Inclusion.** We are dedicated to enhancing diversity within our scrutiny leadership. We will:
 - Increase the number of female leaders within our scrutiny roles, reflecting our community's diversity.
 7. **Investing in Training and Development** to ensure members can effectively perform their role. We will:
 - Provide comprehensive training on crucial issues such as risk management and financial scrutiny.
 - Offer tailored training opportunities based on regular skills audits.
 8. **Adopting Best Practices.** We aim to be a leading example of good governance. We will:
 - Engage with regional and national best practices and learn from other local authorities.
 - Ensure all our meetings are effectively planned and legally supported.
 9. **Develop a Coordinated Work Programme.** Our scrutiny work will be aligned with our strategic goals and community priorities. We will:
 - Develop a work programme that addresses key issues, strategic priorities and reflects residents concerns.
 - Use a clear selection process to prioritise the most important topics for scrutiny.

Commitment from Chief Executive Officer

- 2.6. The Chief Executive has committed to supporting Members to drive through the changes needed to strengthen the scrutiny function in the Council. The Chief Executive has discussed areas of improvement with Overview & Scrutiny Members, Cabinet, and the Statutory Scrutiny Officer.
- 2.7. The Chief Executive attended the Scrutiny Work programme and suggested a number of actions that he would support Scrutiny to deliver to enhance scrutiny, including:

- Aspire to be excellent through visits and learn from the best. To date a visit has taken place to Kensington and Chelsea with our Chair of Scrutiny meeting their equivalent and a sub-committee chair. Plans are being developed to meet with Members from other boroughs for after the general election period.
- Members now have Personal Training Budgets. These were launched at the end of May and Scrutiny Members in particular are encouraged to make use of these.
- The Statutory Scrutiny Officer role needed to be enhanced and as an initial change to improve the visibility of the Statutory Scrutiny Officer role the CE proposes to temporarily designate this to a Corporate Director (whilst the new Scrutiny structure is embedded and then review).
- Enhance the Member mentoring programme – linked to the new Individual Member Budgets – identify suitable external mentors to support senior Members (including Scrutiny Leads) where this is highlighted in the Member's PDP as a priority. Scrutiny Members have been identified as priorities for this project.
- Review and improve how OSC engage with the Executive – any improvements will then be set out in the new Protocol .
- Subject to standard HR restructure procedures and consultation, create a new Scrutiny team with manager and a dedicated team under them of probably 3 members. Research is being undertaken to understand best structures from other authorities and the CfGS and a meeting with HR on 2 July will help to set the formal timeline.
- Review and encourage the use of external experts/advisors and similar to support Scrutiny Sub-Committees and task groups. This will depend on the priority subject areas identified by Scrutiny in their work programme. (The work programme will be signed off in September)
- Establishing a protocol of working with the Executive on pre-scrutiny and call-ins. A draft will be presented to the Committee for review in September. (It will be for the Committee to agree a final version)
- Section 151 to co-ordinate external training for all Scrutiny Members throughout the year so that when budgets need to be scrutinised in year or as part of the main budget process they are in a better position to do so.
- Legal support to be provided at each scrutiny meeting from September.
- An additional meeting for the Housing and Regeneration Scrutiny Sub-Committee. Additional meetings for other sub-committees or changes to the overall structure of sub-committees could be explored if the Committee wish subject to any need to review available resourcing.
- The CE will ensure that there is a budget that is of a sufficient size to meet the requirements set out above and will positively look at other proposals from the Committee.

- Where possible, the activities advocated by the CE will start from September (some are for the Committee to agree so timeline will depend on their decisions).