

General Information and Guidance on Selecting and Rejecting Topics for Scrutiny Reviews

There is a massive amount of information and guidance available on scrutiny. It should be stressed all of the following is guidance and is not prescriptive.

Selecting topics for review

Selecting and prioritising the right issues to review and scrutinise is crucial to the success of scrutiny. It will add value to the Council's work and improve the credibility of scrutiny. Improvements need to be made where it matters, can make a difference and produce tangible benefits.

The following nine questions cover matters the Commission must be very clear on before approving a review. An explanation of each question has been added.

1. What, precisely, will be reviewed?

Members need to be certain exactly which aspect of a service they want to review. Failure to do this will have a knock-on effect for the rest of the work. Imprecision from the Commission will mean a difficult time for the panel and its supporting officers.

2. Why should it be reviewed?

This is the most important of the nine questions. The best topics are those where there is:

- high Member interest
- high public interest
- evidence the service is under performing
- clear user dissatisfaction
- certainty the review will make a difference where other work will not
- a clear link to corporate priorities
- a clear link to key areas for improvement
- a new, approach being taken by the Commission or a panel

3. Are the reasons for the review good ones, which would stand up to scrutiny themselves?

Could you justify spending the Council's money on the review to a constituent? If so, it's probably a good topic.

Scrutiny needs to be able to justify why it chooses the reviews it does. The Commission is accountable for the resources it uses.

4. How will the subject be reviewed and is this achievable by the resources available?

While imaginative thinking among Members is always encouraged, it is important to be aware of reality.

Members must be conscious of officer resources available (and not just in the service area itself) and other costs (such as visits to other councils). Launching a review of a severely short staffed service may make problems worse.

5. What is the outcome of the review expected to be and how will it improve the lives of Crawley's residents?

It is not always easy to predict, but often the sign of a good review is one where the likely improvements are obvious. If Members are struggling to think of the wider benefits of a review, it is unlikely to be a good choice.

6. Will the outcome assist in achieving the corporate objectives?

The corporate objectives set out the longer term aims for the town. Everything the Council does should fit in with these, scrutiny reviews included.

While Members are not expected to know these off by heart, they can't be ignored totally.

7. Are the issues (and outcomes) important to local people? Will the Commission add value?

An ideal review is where both the issue and outcome are important to local people.

There are issues of great importance to which the Council can do little about. An additional runway at Gatwick is a good example. A panel would risk becoming a talking shop, whilst acknowledging there would be great public interest in the issue, the final decision would be made elsewhere.

On the other hand, a review of some of the Council's support services (such as finance or legal) may not be of high importance to the public. However, it could lead to savings and a knock-on effect on council tax.

Most importantly, it is important to consider if the review will actually add value.

8. What sort of timescale is involved?

In general, there is a presumption against reviews which have either very long or very short timescales.

A very short timescale suggests not much work is needed and it could be done on a much more informal basis. The exception would be where the Commission itself has been set a very tight timescale. An example might be the response to an important consultation where a detailed discussion at a panel could be more useful than at the more time constrained Commission.

A review which is expected to take a very long time is again less likely to help as it will become disjointed when panel Members and officers change.

9. Are the potential recommendations likely to be financially viable?

This will be quite hard to judge before a review starts work.

Ultimately the Commission does not have the luxury of implementing its own work and must be conscious of costs. There is no point starting a review whose recommendations will be rejected immediately because they are too expensive. The Commission must be realistic about what it can achieve.

Reasons to reject a Review

1. It's a new policy area

Panels suggest areas where new policies are needed and may even come up with some ideas. They can also investigate whether policies are having the desired effect. Scrutiny does not look at creating new policies.

2. It duplicates recent, existing or programmed work

Members must be very aware of duplication. There will be exciting topics where Members would love to get involved, but if something similar is being done elsewhere, doing it again is a waste of time.

3. New legislation or guidance is expected within the next year

There is no point reviewing something where the rules governing the service are about to change. Officers will know this and can advise appropriately.

4. There are other, better, ways of picking up the review

Scrutiny isn't always the best way of dealing with a problem. There may be other better, easier ways of resolving issues – perhaps by simply talking to the appropriate officers or Cabinet Members.