

Southend-on-Sea Borough Council

Agenda
Item No.

Report of Executive Director
(Legal & Democratic Services)

to

Place, People and Policy & Resources Scrutiny
Committees

On 5th, 6th and 8th July 2021

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Officer)

In-Depth Scrutiny Projects and Summary of Work 2020/21 A Part 1 Agenda Item

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 For the Committee to consider progress with regard to the in-depth scrutiny projects undertaken during the 2020/21 municipal year and to consider a possible joint approach to in-depth scrutiny activity for 2021/22.
- 1.2 The report also provides information about the work carried out by each of the scrutiny committees during the previous year.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 That progress with regard to the in-depth scrutiny projects undertaken during the 2020/21 municipal year, be noted.
- 2.2 That, subject to the concurrence of the other scrutiny committees, a single in-depth scrutiny project around the 'Councillor Queries' process be undertaken on behalf of the three scrutiny committees during the 2021/22 municipal year.
- 2.3 That no other topic(s) be selected by the Committee for additional in-depth review during 2021/22.
- 2.4 That the Committee note the summary of the scrutiny work undertaken during 2020/21.

3. In-Depth Scrutiny Projects – Background

- 3.1 As councillors will be aware, each of the scrutiny committees has traditionally undertaken an in-depth scrutiny project each year. The in-depth projects are selected at the beginning of each municipal year and generally focus on the Council's corporate priorities or matters of local concern. Recent in-depth scrutiny projects have also been aligned with the ambition and outcomes arising from the Southend 2050 programme. A list of the in-depth scrutiny projects previously undertaken by the scrutiny committees is attached as Appendix 1 to this report.
- 3.2 The in-depth scrutiny projects lead to the development of reports and recommendations which advise the Executive and the Council on its policies, budget provision and service delivery. The delivery of each project is driven through a member Programme Working Party (Project Team), supported by

relevant officers. Participation in the in-depth projects enable councillors to be actively involved in a particular topic and to influence and shape proposals around service improvement that will result in benefits/outcomes.

- 3.3 The undertaking of the annual in-depth scrutiny projects is not a statutory requirement and is derived from the power set out in Section 9(c) (Policy Review and Development) of the Scrutiny Procedure Rules at Part 4(e) of the Council's Constitution, which provides that the scrutiny committees may hold enquiries and investigate options for future direction in policy development.

4. In-Depth Scrutiny Projects 2020/21 – Progress

- 4.1 The following in-depth scrutiny projects have been completed during the last year:

People Scrutiny Committee

'The appropriate use of reablement for older people (65 and over) when discharged from hospital, to maximise the number of people at home after period of ninety-one days.'

Place Scrutiny Committee

'To review the level of domestic waste recycling in the Borough, in order to examine what influences residents in terms of their recycling habits and what the barriers are to achieving a higher rate of recycling and to consider ways of working with residents to improve domestic waste recycling.'

Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee

'How the Council and councillors communicate with local people and stakeholders and facilitate engagement and participation'.

- 4.2 The report of the in-depth scrutiny project for the People Scrutiny Committee was considered by the Committee at its meeting on 24 November 2020 and the recommendations arising from the project were agreed by the Cabinet on 14 January 2021. The report and recommendations arising from the completion of the in-depth scrutiny project for the Place Scrutiny Committee will be reported to the meeting of that Committee to be held on 5 July 2021. The report and recommendations arising from the completion of the in-depth scrutiny project for the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee for 202/21, will be reported to the meeting of that Committee on 8 July 2021.
- 4.3 The Committee is requested to note progress with regard to its in-depth scrutiny project undertaken during the 2020/21 municipal year.

5. In-Depth Scrutiny Project 2021/22

- 5.1 At this meeting, the Committee would normally agree the nature of the in-depth scrutiny project that it wishes to undertake during the municipal year. As already indicated, the undertaking of the annual in-depth scrutiny projects is not a statutory requirement and is based on local practice over a number of years.

- 5.2 Since March 2020, the impact of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic has required the Council to focus its effort and resources on the delivery of priority activities and services, which has included the ongoing dedication and/or redeployment of resources and capacity that would normally support in-depth scrutiny projects, towards the delivery of key services for local residents. Partly as a result of the response to the pandemic, the in-depth scrutiny projects for 2020/21 took longer than usual to complete.
- 5.3 The undertaking of the in-depth scrutiny projects in the traditional way can be resource intensive. Each Programme Working Party (Project Team) must be fully supported throughout the scoping, delivery and progress reporting of the project and appropriate specialist capacity is often required to facilitate aspects of projects. In addition, it has regularly been necessary to arrange and undertake appropriate site visits, conduct public surveys, hold public meetings, and commission research etc. to inform the delivery of projects.
- 5.4 As a consequence of the ongoing response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the need to also focus on local recovery priorities going forward, the traditional approach to the undertaking of broad in-depth scrutiny projects might not be the best use of resources and capacity in the short-term. It is important that this type of scrutiny activity recognises the level of resources and capacity available, and it may not necessarily be appropriate during the continuing response to the pandemic for scrutiny projects to consider service changes or improvements in isolation.
- 5.5 The Committee might therefore wish to consider whether the use of in-depth scrutiny projects should be paused in favour of a dedicated focus on the review of relevant business issues that help councillors to carry out their role and support the Council through recovery from the challenges presented by the pandemic, whilst also allowing local economic recovery to continue to be driven by the delivery of key schemes. A single in-depth joint scrutiny project could be undertaken for 2021/22, involving each of the scrutiny committees, focussed on matters of importance to councillors.
- 5.6 Joint in-depth scrutiny projects have previously been conducted by the scrutiny committees on a number of occasions. In 2016/17, a joint project was undertaken by the Policy and Resources and Place Scrutiny Committees, to investigate whether there was a need for additional enforcement resources for Southend. A joint project was also undertaken during 2018/19, also by the Policy and Resources and Place Scrutiny Committees, looking at the re-imagining the town centre in the context of the vision for Southend 2050.
- 5.7 An issue that has been identified as an important priority by a number of members and which could constitute a possible focus for joint scrutiny activity this year, is the 'Councillor Queries' arrangement for the handling of enquiries and questions that councillors raise with officers of the Council. The Councillor Queries process has generated a mixed experience for councillors since its introduction, and some members have raised concerns about the way it works and enables them to deliver their democratic mandate to their electorate. This could therefore form the basis for a focussed form of scrutiny project that could be led by the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee on behalf of each of the scrutiny committees. This approach could also build on the work undertaken as

part of the in-depth scrutiny project for the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee over the last year.

- 5.8 It is anticipated that such scrutiny activity, possibly with a shorter reporting timeframe than has normally been adopted for the formal in-depth scrutiny projects, would be relevant to all members of the Council, particularly as this could also inform the work that is already ongoing to improve the Councillor Queries process through the action plan for the new Protocol on Councillor/Officer Relations adopted in 2020. All councillors would have an opportunity to contribute to the scrutiny project.
- 5.9 The undertaking of a joint scrutiny project as described above would enable scrutiny activity to be coordinated and directed towards an area of key importance to members, without the need to dedicate resources and capacity to separate projects. This would therefore have advantages in terms of a reduced and beneficial impact on other work to support local COVID-19 recovery and the delivery of key schemes, than would be case if separate projects were to be undertaken.
- 5.10 This possible joint in-depth scrutiny activity for 2021/22 has been informally discussed with the chairs of each of the scrutiny committees. If the nature of such joint project is agreed by the scrutiny committees, further consideration will be given to the scope of the project and the development of an appropriate action plan for agreement at the next cycle of meetings. The scoping of the proposed joint scrutiny project will also need to consider how this activity could be undertaken and delivered by the Programme Working Parties, for which member appointments were made by the Council at its meeting on 20 May 2021 (Appendix 2).
- 5.11 It is therefore recommended that a single in-depth scrutiny project around the Councillor Queries process be undertaken on behalf of all three scrutiny committees during 2021/22 and that, in light of the proposed scrutiny project and the Council's ongoing response to the COVID-19 pandemic, no additional topic(s) be selected by the Committee for in-depth review during the year.

6. Work Undertaken by the Scrutiny Committees 2020/21

- 6.1 A summary of the work undertaken by each of the scrutiny committees during the 2020/21 municipal year is attached at Appendix 3.
- 6.2 The Committee is requested to note the summary of the work it has undertaken during 2020/21.

7. Corporate Implications

Contribution to the Southend 2050 Road Map

Becoming an excellent and high performing organisation.

Financial Implications

There are costs associated with organising in-depth projects relating to officer time, but this will all be contained within existing resources.

Legal Implications

None

People Implications

None.

Property Implications

None

Consultation

As described in report.

Equalities and Diversity Implications

None

Risk Assessment

None

8. Background Papers

None

9. Appendices

Appendix 1 - Previous In-Depth Scrutiny Projects

Appendix 2 - Membership of Programme Working Parties for 2021/22

Appendix 3 - Summary of work of the Scrutiny Committees for 2020/21