

# Northampton Borough Council Overview & Scrutiny



## OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY

### Inquiry Protocol

#### **1 Guidelines for operation of an Overview and Scrutiny Inquiry**

Overview and Scrutiny Inquiries need to operate on a relatively informal basis in the sense that they are a forum for adding scrutiny input into a Review or issue that is currently being worked on by Officers within the Council. Overview and Scrutiny Inquiries have no delegated powers.

Meetings will take place as often as needed until the task is complete. Timescales will vary dependent upon the issue being investigated. The Overview and Scrutiny Inquiry should aim to hold the necessary meetings within as short a timeframe as possible so that findings do not become out of date before completion of the task.

If applicable, visits can also be very useful in helping Overview and Scrutiny Inquiries to get to grips with issues and should be arranged for the Inquiry, or individual representatives of the Inquiry, as needed.

Meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Inquiries will be less formal than meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Scrutiny Panels. Overview and Scrutiny Inquiry meetings are not held in public session.

Meetings of an Overview and Scrutiny Inquiry require an approach that allows all Members of the Inquiry to participate fully, and incorporates questioning and discussion with Officers. Informal ways of working are to be encouraged.

Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Inquiry should operate within the agreed plan for the task and must not disclose or use any information/knowledge obtained through involvement in the Inquiry for any other purpose. Councillors should not do anything to pre-empt or undermine the outcome of an Overview and Scrutiny Inquiry's recommendations.

The Lead Councillor for the Overview and Scrutiny Inquiry has a role to make sure that Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee are kept informed regarding progress of

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tasks through regular progress reports.

## **2 Membership**

Membership of an Inquiry will initially be drawn from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. It is usual for a member of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to be designated Lead Councillor for an Inquiry but on occasions, a non-Executive, who is not a member of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, may be nominated Lead Councillor of an Overview and Scrutiny Inquiry. Should it be felt that membership of the Inquiry should be widened to include non-Executives (who are not members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee); the Chair will issue an email inviting non-Executives to take part.

The membership of each Overview and Scrutiny Inquiry will vary, between a minimum of two Members to a maximum of seven, according to the purpose for which it is established.

Non-Executives may join the membership of an Overview and Scrutiny Inquiry, until the Inquiry has begun to receive evidence. After this point the membership of the Inquiry should not be increased as all Members of the Inquiry will be required to receive and hear all evidence in order to make an informed decision about the recommendations that it will be put forward at the end of the process. The Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee will delegate authority to the Lead Councillor of the Inquiry to determine the membership of the Overview and Scrutiny Inquiry.

Political balance will not apply. Should more than seven Members want to take part, a decision would be taken by the Lead Councillor of the Inquiry to ensure that at least one Member of each political group was allocated to the Inquiry.

There is no Substitute Scheme for Members unable to attend any meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Inquiries, due to the fact that all Members of the Inquiry will be required to receive and hear all evidence in order to make an informed decision about the recommendations that it will be put forward at the end of the process

Any of the Overview and Scrutiny Inquiries may appoint non-voting co-opted Members. Co-opted members will have an opportunity to influence the Inquiry's lines of enquiry, but they will not be able to take part in any vote, if one takes place. The Scrutiny Officer will provide relevant training to Co-opted Members on the Overview and Scrutiny process.

## **3 Gathering information**

Once the Overview and Scrutiny Inquiry has been set up, it will actively gather its evidence. Rather than minutes of the meeting, notes are usually taken to record evidence given at meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Inquiries.

## **4 Reflect, learn and draw conclusions**

When the Overview and Scrutiny Inquiry has gathered all the evidence it needs, it will assess it and reflect on what it has learned.

The report of the Overview and Scrutiny Inquiry recommendations must be an expression of the views of the Inquiry rather than a report to the Inquiry written by Officers. The Scrutiny Officer will meet with the Lead Councillor for the Inquiry and draft the report on their behalf.

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The final report will be based on facts collected and give a full picture of the issues under scrutiny. It will reflect the range of views presented to the Overview and Scrutiny Inquiry. The report will contain conclusions (key findings) and clear recommendations. When the Overview and Scrutiny Inquiry has finished its report, the Lead Councillor of the Inquiry presents the work to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. As part of this process, they will explain the work that has been done and ask the Committee to support its recommendations. The Committee could also comment on the report or ask for further work to be done.

On occasions, there will not be the need for an Overview and Scrutiny Inquiry to produce a full report and its comments and views will be recorded in the report of the relevant Portfolio Holder that will be presented to Cabinet. This highlights that Overview and Scrutiny has made a valuable contribution to the issue and its comments taken on board.