

# Making Scrutiny more effective for Swindon

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## Lets make Scrutiny more effective for Swindon

Overview and Scrutiny has been in operation in Swindon for a decade, during that time the function has evolved greatly and has become embedded into the political management structure of the Council. The evolution of Overview and Scrutiny in Swindon has led to partner organisations such as the Primary Care Trust, NHS, Police and LAA partners featuring regularly in Overview and Scrutiny meetings and assisting in the overall process.

In the past decade there has been successes and elements that went less well in Overview and Scrutiny in Swindon, we want to use these past experiences to help improve the Overview and Scrutiny function so that it performs a more effective role for Swindon.

The Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS) and the Local Government Association (LGA) have outlined four key principles of effective scrutiny, these are:

- Provide critical friend challenge to executives as well as external authorities and agencies
- Reflect the voice and concerns of the public and its communities
- Take the lead and own the scrutiny process on behalf of the public
- Make an impact on the delivery of public services

Using these key principles as a guide we consulted with those involved in the Overview and Scrutiny function in Swindon through focus groups, surveys and one to one interviews to produce views, guidance and advice that will hopefully lead to better Scrutiny, better policy development, better partnership working and a better Swindon.

Those views have been collated to create this guidance booklet. The booklet allows scrutineers, witnesses, officers, partners and the public to understand each others view on what scrutiny is and how it can be effective.

By providing a snapshot of how those involved in the process view its effectiveness and how it can be improved we hope to drive forward a collective approach towards delivering effective Overview and Scrutiny for the people of Swindon.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kevin Small".

Councillor Kevin Small  
Chair of Overview & Scrutiny



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Roderick Bluh".

Councillor Roderick Bluh  
Leader of the Council

## What is effective scrutiny – A Councillor Perspective

### The role of Overview & Scrutiny is.....

- Engaging back-benchers
- Holding ALL decision makers to account
- Help create new policy
- To provide effective, unbiased critical analysis to provide positive change
- To make sure Council policy is positively implemented and delivers value for money

### A Scrutiny friendly culture is.....

- Welcoming challenge
- Takes advice and guidance on board
- Open and transparent
- Where Cabinet pro-actively engages with the Scrutiny function
- Not looking for blame
- One where honest answers are provided despite the pain or revelation they may bring
- Where Councillors, Officers and Partners can share openly their views and concerns
- One of respect
- Positively supported by the management structure of the Council

### Scrutiny will work best when.....

- Everybody participates, prepares and comes with an open mind without hidden agendas.
- Councillors are knowledgeable, well briefed and fully supported in their endeavours to ascertain the facts
- Those involved are adequately trained
- Officers appreciate the positive role Scrutiny can play

### Overview & Scrutiny in Swindon will be more effective if.....

- Scrutiny recommendations are well evidenced
- There were more dedicated Overview and Scrutiny staff
- It was more focused on achieving challenging targets
- Officers understood the role of Overview and Scrutiny and positively engaged in the process
- There was a Scrutiny action register to ensure all actions were addressed
- Quick access to any information needed and prompt responses to questions raised
- Cabinet see's through the implementation of evidenced based recommendations
- Work programmes were more resolute and focused

## What is effective scrutiny – A Cabinet Perspective

### The role of Overview & Scrutiny is.....

- Add value to the decision making process
- To investigate policy and develop policy proposals
- To identify areas that require further investigation
- Should endeavour to be non-partizan
- To challenge Cabinet Members on their performance
- To conduct performance reviews
- Avoid political point scoring

### A Scrutiny friendly culture is.....

- A culture of respect, for people, policy, process and the Council
- Responsive
- Non-partizan
- Working in the best interests of the people of Swindon
- A culture of trust

### Overview & Scrutiny in Swindon will be more effective if.....

- It is focused on outputs and outcomes
- It utilised the clusters
- Cabinet conducted consultation through Overview and Scrutiny
- the Scrutiny committee co-ordinated entire function / Scrutiny committee selects all work programmes
- Committees had a coordinated approach to questioning
- It focused public involvement in the process
- There was a coordinated approach to all forms of scrutiny across the whole Borough
- Directly linked to the CSP
- Work programmes relate to policy programme of the Executive
- It held specific public meetings
- It developed its partnership function
- Cabinet commissioned topics for review

### Scrutiny will work best when.....

It has an inclusive, fair and focused Chair

Members put in the effort

It has a realistic workload

It is positive

It looks to the future not to the past

It has a clearly focused workload

It influences future learning

Members prepare for their role (read reports)

It is constructive

Its role is understood by all involved



## What is effective scrutiny – A Officer Perspective

### The role of Overview & Scrutiny is.....

- To review the current plans of the Council and to provide challenge to those, including suggestions for future provision.
- To work with officers and Members to develop and review Council policy
- To scrutinise, on behalf of the people of Swindon, the effective working of the administration, to ensure that due process is followed and that there is transparency and fairness in decision making
- Providing effective links to members of the public, with elected members testing ideas or bringing local issues to bear
- Providing direction to areas of work.

### A Scrutiny friendly culture is.....

- Everyone accepting that scrutiny is an important part of the decision-making process
- In its scrutiny role, it should challenge constructively, focusing on the issue not the person. It should encourage a culture of learning rather than one of blame.
- Working creatively with officers and Members to explore options with as open a mind as possible and with a willingness to innovate and take risks, whilst keeping in view the outcomes we are seeking to achieve
- Where Scrutiny is accepted as a priority area for the Council
- An open and honest conversation focused upon finding the best solution for the people of Swindon.

### Scrutiny will work best when.....

- Challenges are valid and relevant to the subject without bringing up specific issues from Wards that should have been dealt with outside of such a meeting
- It is focused on the key issue and questions are concise, clear and probing.
- It embraces more innovative ways of engagement such as social networking and public meetings like the flooding review
- it works collaboratively with officers and members, sharing a commitment to reach the outcome we are seeking
- Members understand the constraints that officers sometimes face
- It focuses on practical solutions to benefit local people

### Overview & Scrutiny in Swindon will be more effective if.....

- It made more use of technology
- It held meetings outside the Civic Offices
- It was more accessible to the public
- It was less formal
- It made more use of Connecting People Connecting Places
- It was more creative in monitoring the performance of services
- It made use of external experts to bring balance to the debate
- It focused on strategic links to ensure that issues are effectively managed.

## What is effective scrutiny – A Health Partner Perspective

### The role of Overview & Scrutiny is.....

- Working in partnership with public service providers to improve the well-being and quality of life of the people who reside within the local authority's boundaries
- To provide an external voice on health services
- To act as a critical friend and treat health partners as equal partners who care about the same things.
- Ultimately, scrutiny is a safety net that ensures that we make the right commissioning decisions
- To help bring Council and health services together

### A Scrutiny friendly culture is.....

- An open, honest sharing of expertise and ideas.
- It is one that encourages all to work at their best to bring about the best outcomes for the people we are here to serve.
- It is one where everyone is treated with dignity and respect and works together as members of the same team rather than opponents
- One where the Cabinet is responsive to the work of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees

### Scrutiny will work best when.....

- We work together... in collaboration and when critique is constructive rather than destructive.
- When it is solution- rather than blame-focused.
- It also works best when health organisations have the opportunity to share information with scrutineers informally at an earlier stage than formal public meetings so that they can tell us sooner rather than later what the issues are for the locality. That way we can ensure we address these before we ask scrutiny to formally decide on whether or not a proposal is a substantial variation.
- Scrutineers accept invitations to come to health partners public events

### Overview & Scrutiny in Swindon will be more effective if.....

- Agenda's were kept manageable – consider some proposals via your chair so that we do not have to bring every proposal to you unless it's about something you particularly want more information on
- There is a clear purpose for the involvement of the Overview and Scrutiny Function
- Health practitioners and patients were more involved
- Meetings took place outside of the Council
- The public, especially patients, were more actively engaged



## What is effective scrutiny – A Police/ Community Safety Perspective

### The role of Overview & Scrutiny is.....

- It is about ensuring the delivery of quality joined up local public services at an affordable cost
- To ensure that the best use is made of the collective resources of the Swindon Strategic Partnership
- To represent the concerns of the people of Swindon

### A Scrutiny friendly culture is.....

- Transparent
- Constructive
- Holding individual agencies within partnership to account



### Scrutiny will work best when.....

- There is accurate and relevant data regarding partnership activity and out comes
- There is the opportunity to challenge performance constructively as well as applaud success in order to maintain community confidence
- It builds relationships and creates a collective approach to dealing with a problem



### Overview & Scrutiny in Swindon will be more effective if.....

- All involved developed a shared understanding of 'One Swindon' and how it should be delivered
- Scrutiny recommendations are evidence based and supported by partners
- Recommendations to external partners are supported by good communication, support and an awareness of the need to build upon partnership working

## What is effective scrutiny – A Strategic Partner Perspective

### The role of Overview & Scrutiny is.....

- To provide a critical edge to partnership work as part of an overall public accountability process
- To ensure that decisions taken are robust, transparent and in the best interests of the Council, Partners and the communities it serves
- To help Partners deliver on behalf of the people of Swindon

### A Scrutiny friendly culture is.....

- One that embraces and welcomes external views, is open and transparent about the challenges and decisions made to meet these, and see this as a joint venture in order to ensure continuous improvement for the common good
- One that works with partners not against them
- Where Scrutiny is welcomed as a valuable tool and not seen as something to be avoided or a 'necessary evil'
- Where the Council promotes the role of Scrutiny to its partners

### Scrutiny will work best when.....

- There is a common goal and commitment to listen, understand and change in order to ensure best value for money and effective outcomes
- It is completely impartial and independent and free of parochial self-interest
- Councillors understand the role that Partners are playing
- It is independent
- Local citizens and service users are involved
- The Scrutiny Unit makes itself more visible to Partners

### Overview & Scrutiny in Swindon will be more effective if.....

- There was a sense of purpose about the aspects selected, moving away from any suggestion of 'inspection' and 'exposure' of problems which can produce defensiveness, and an open common approach that seeks to jointly establish how best to meet partnership challenges to better the lives of people in Swindon.
- A focus on creating value not process
- Partners were involved in Scrutiny training
- The expertise of Partners was utilised by Scrutiny



## What is effective scrutiny – A Public Perspective

### The role of Overview & Scrutiny is.....

- To represent the views and concerns of the general public
- To monitor the proposals and decisions made by Cabinet and other committees, to determine whether they have been made in accordance with SBC protocols, and for the general good of the taxpayer and residents of the Borough
- To improve public services in Swindon
- To be challenging on behalf of the people of Swindon
- To ensure that Swindon Borough Council acts in the best interests of the people of Swindon

### A Scrutiny friendly culture is.....

- Inclusive, open and honest
- Open to all who want to be involved
- Open to new ideas and suggestions
- Accessible to the public it seeks to represent

### Overview & Scrutiny in Swindon will be more effective if.....

- It works like parliamentary select committees
- When members recognise the need to set aside their partisan feelings and do the job they have been selected to do
- Members challenge those before them in detail, not just on their actions, but the alternatives and reasoning for the decisions.

### Scrutiny will work best when.....

- Meetings allowed more time for 'public' questions and for open comment.
- Councillors were more engaging with the public and actively sought and welcomed public involvement in the process.
- Councillors act as scrutineers not party politicians
- A more inclusive and pro-active public question time was introduced
- It sought to involve the public wherever possible, whether through co-option or consultation
- The Cabinet utilised the Overview and Scrutiny Committees
- Meetings took place out of the Council Offices
- It looked to review non-council issues

## Making Scrutiny in Swindon more effective

The responses from all of those involved in the Overview and Scrutiny function in Swindon have shown that there is support for the process and a realisation that Overview and Scrutiny can have a positive impact. This is highlighted by some of the additional comments that we have received.

### **There are areas that are identified as a key role for the Overview and Scrutiny function:**

- Holder decision makers to account – being a critical friend
- Developing, shaping and influencing policy – setting priorities
- Helping deliver positive change and value for money
- To ensure all parties in Swindon work together for the benefit of Swindon

### **Overview and Scrutiny is generally seen to work best when:**

- Councillors and Cabinet are engaged in the Process
- Partners and the Public are actively involved
- There is a positive, non-partisan culture which supports and promotes Scrutiny
- Officers appreciate the role that Scrutiny can play
- Local citizens and service users are involved
- There is adequate training for those involved

We urge those involved in Overview and Scrutiny to take the suggestions and comments in this booklet on board when carrying out their role in the Overview and Scrutiny function. Most importantly we urge all to positively get involved in Scrutiny and help work towards making Swindon a better place to live, work and play.

If you would like further information on the Overview and Scrutiny function in Swindon then please contact Swindon's Scrutiny Unit at:

Scrutiny Unit  
Civic Offices  
Euclid Street  
Swindon  
SN1 2JH

**Tel:** 01793 463109 / 463412

**Email:** [scrutiny@swindon.gov.uk](mailto:scrutiny@swindon.gov.uk)

*“An example of good Scrutiny work is the way that the Safer and Stronger Overview and Scrutiny Committee has adopted alcohol as a key theme and has sought to address the issues raised by the inappropriate use of alcohol, recognising it as a key issue to improving Swindon”*

*“I have to say that I have found our work with Swindon HOSC to be a wholly positive experience that has enabled my team to produce better paperwork and make better commissioning decisions. Swindon helped me tremendously in my new role as engagement lead and I can say that the way my organisation works with scrutiny across the region and the way we produce our paperwork (which regularly gets commended) is very much a reflection of the advice and guidance that Swindon's scrutiny officer gave me when I was first in post.”*

This information about 'Making Scrutiny more effective for Swindon' is available on the internet at [www.swindon.gov.uk](http://www.swindon.gov.uk). It can be produced in a range of languages and formats (such as large print, Braille or other accessible formats) by contacting the Customer Services Department.

Tel: 01793 445500 Fax: 01793 463331 E-mail: [customerservices@swindon.gov.uk](mailto:customerservices@swindon.gov.uk)

Swindon Borough Council are working in partnership with Wiltshire Police, Probation Service, NHS Swindon, Great Western Hospital, Swindon Strategic Partnership and Swindon Community Safety Partnership.

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