

**Customer & Corporate Services Scrutiny
Management Committee**

13 December 2021

Report of the Director of Governance

Scrutiny Review Support Budget 2022/23

Summary

1. This report sets out the current position in relation to available Council funding for research in support of scrutiny review work.
2. Customer and Corporate Services Scrutiny Management Committee (CCSMC) has a constitutional right, under its delegated authority, to consider and recommend to the Executive a budget for scrutiny research. This report seeks to consult Members on any recommendations it may wish to make to the Executive prior to the budget setting process for 2022/23.

Background

3. Since February 2011, Scrutiny has been allocated a research support budget for reviews in the sum of £5k per annum. In previous years, that budget has either been shared out across each Scrutiny Committee or retained for use by CCSMC as appropriate.
4. In making its recommendations on this budget to Budget Council for the last few financial years, this Committee has debated at some length the merits of potentially asking Council to increase this support budget to enable more outward facing scrutiny to take place. In light of the low spend reported below consistently against this budget, the Council has continued to allocate an annual sum of £5k.
5. The impact of the Covid 19 pandemic on scrutiny activity has naturally affected spend and what work has been possible to undertake.

Analysis

6. In this current financial year to date 2021/22, there has been no spend against this budget which, at this stage, again demonstrates a continuing

trend and one which is unlikely to change for the remainder of the financial year given the ongoing impact of Covid on resources. Members will recall that new working arrangements to continue some scrutiny activity were introduced during the pandemic, namely the introduction of informal Scrutiny Forums meeting remotely, with a reduced number of mainline public Committee meetings. In fairness, these arrangements have resulted in a reduced need to call on the potential for chargeable external research activity.

7. Historically, looking back to 2016/17, this Committee allocated the available budget on alternative spend to cover required training costs for Scrutiny Chairs when appointed to reflect new working arrangements following the changes Council agreed to the scrutiny structure which became operational in June 2017. This training also doubled up as refresher training in scrutiny skills and feedback from those Members attending at the time was extremely positive. Total costs for this training amounted to £1,426.40.
8. Irrespective of recent changes to scrutiny arrangements, to demonstrate the historical pattern of low spend against this budget for a number of years, the position is as follows:
 - 2009/10 - £41 + £17k (agreed by Council for the specific purpose of undertaking a public consultation survey in support of the traffic congestion scrutiny review ongoing at that time)
 - 2010/11 - £380
 - 2011/12 - £0
 - 2012/13 - £1,500 (health work shop facilitation)
 - 2013/14 - £0
 - 2014/15 - £2,500. Following a decision by this Committee in January 2015, the available budget was again used for scrutiny training purposes i.e.:
 - 3 cross party Members (and 2 officers) travelling to and attending the Annual Centre for Public Scrutiny Studies Conference and Awards;
 - £1k contribution to Leeds City Council to cover the cost of running the regional Joint Health & Overview Scrutiny Committee; and
 - Some travel expenses for a Councillor attending an event in London to gather information for an ongoing scrutiny review; and

- 2 Members attending a Pupil Premium Conference

2015/16 - £350 in relation to support costs for the Tour De France Scrutiny Review.

9. Given the use of IT facilities and the internet in recent years as essential research tools, it is noticeable that there has been less need to 'buy in' paid external research in relation to the chosen reviews over the last few years. Over the last few years, any external research support engaged for scrutiny has been at no cost to the Authority, as a result of the willingness on the part of external 'specialists' to engage freely with the Council. Such examples would be the Bootham Park Hospital review completed by the former Health & Adult Social Care Policy & Scrutiny Committee in September 2016 and academic support provided by the University of York and The Joseph Rowntree Foundation on various reviews.

Member Training

10. As reported in paragraph 8 above, this particular research budget has sometimes been used for specific training on scrutiny, when there has been little or no spend in relation to specific research work.
11. There is, however, a specific budget set aside for Member Training. Annually, this amounts to £5k and is often supplemented specifically for an induction year of newly elected Members.
12. Prior to the pandemic hitting, Scrutiny Chairs and Vice Chairs had planned to discuss the potential for specific scrutiny training for scrutiny members, looking at the possibility of diverting funds from this budget for the specific purpose. However, at a time when the Council is just over a year away from all out local elections, it may not be wise to consider a full training round. Scrutiny training will be considered as a part of the key induction of newly elected (and returned) Members for May 2023 onwards.

Consultation

13. No consultation was required on this report at this stage, given that it provides this Committee with their constitutional opportunity to consider making a recommendation to Executive for a research support budget for scrutiny.

Options

14. (i) Having regard to the analysis section in this report, to note the position and recommend to Executive not to provide any budget

specifically to support external research and consultancy work for scrutiny in 2022/23 onwards; or

- (ii) To recommend Executive retains the current budgetary support for external research and consultancy work, explaining why; or
- (iii) To recommend Executive increases the current budgetary support for external scrutiny research/consultancy, explaining why and suggesting an appropriate figure.

Council Plan 2019-23

- 15. Whilst this report does not in itself materially affect how the work of scrutiny can support and develop the Council's overall priorities to set out in the new Council Plan 2019-23, how scrutiny organises itself and undertakes its activities could have a significant impact on how it contributes to the Council's development.

Implications

- 16. **Financial** – There would, of course, continue to be some financial impact should this Committee recommend continuing with a scrutiny research support budget, if the Executive supported that proposal. If funding continues at a comparatively low level as currently provided, then that impact would be minimal in comparison to the potential benefits of receiving any support, if required. However, in times of financial constraint upon all Councils following the pandemic, Members would be prudent to consider the recommendation of any funding most carefully for 2022/23, given the lack of spend over many consecutive years.
- 17. There are no Human Resources, Equalities, Legal, Information Technology, Crime & Disorder or other implications associated with the recommendations in this report. Constitutionally, this Committee has the right to recommend to Executive an appropriate budget to support scrutiny research.

Risk Management

- 18. Clearly, this Committee needs to address what it believes the current and future needs of scrutiny may be, taking into account the historical levels of spend and any potential impact on improvements to Council performance/services. Based on previous years level of spend in this area, there is a continuing risk that any budget allocation made in the

future could largely remain unused, unless a significant change in practices results in a need to call upon paid external research support.

Conclusions

19. It is clear that there has been very little call on this budget spend since 2009/10 and that it has become a continuing trend for the budget not to be required to be spent on external research or consultancy. Rather in recent years this Committee and other Scrutiny Committees have looked to diversify and seek to use the funds in alternative ways.
20. The reasons for this are diverse as referenced in this report. In part it is due to the topics chosen in recent times and to a decreasing number of those running up to a local election year. In part also due to the changing nature of the way Scrutiny Officers can undertake their own research using technology and the willingness of external 'specialists' to provide their time to the Council at no cost.
21. Undoubtedly, support for scrutiny has suffered since the pandemic, with the loss of direct Scrutiny Officers and the necessity to re-prioritise any time which departmental officers previously afforded to assist scrutiny in their reviews and overview work.
22. It is difficult to envisage scrutiny needing to call upon this particular budget in the coming year given the information contained in this report.

Recommendations

23. Members are asked to consider what recommendation to make to the Executive in relation to a scrutiny support budget for use on external consultation/market research, for consideration as part of the Council's budget setting process for 2022/23

Reason: To address the Committee's constitutional right to comment to Executive on setting the above scrutiny budget.

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Specialist Implications Officer(s)

None

All

Wards Affected:

For further information please contact the author of the report

Background Papers: None

Annexes: None