
**Customer & Corporate Services Scrutiny
Management Committee**

11 November 2019

Report of the Assistant Director – Legal & Governance

Scrutiny Review Support Budget 2020/21

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 (CSMC) has a constitutional right, under its delegated authority, to consider and recommend to the Executive a budget for scrutiny. This report seeks to consult Members on any recommendations it may wish to make to the Executive prior to the budget setting process for 2020/21.

Background

3. Since February 2011, Scrutiny has been allocated a research support budget for reviews in the sum of £5k per annum. Over the years, that budget has either been shared out across each Scrutiny Committee or retained for use by CSMC as appropriate.
4. In making its recommendations on this budget to Budget Council for the last 2 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 £15k.

Analysis

5. In this current financial year to date 2019/20, there has been no spend against this budget which, at this stage, again demonstrates a continuing trend and one which is unlikely to change unless and until scrutiny engagement and focus shifts towards requiring external expert participation. Of course, approximately 5 months of the budget year do remain. This year, of course, the Council has established a new Climate

Change Scrutiny Committee and the nature of the work of that Committee may well require more external research support, which needs funding. The other change this year, of course, is that our Scrutiny Committees are meeting monthly which could well create more demand and opportunity for spend against this particular budget.

8. 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.
9. To demonstrate further historically the 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.

10. 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. Where external research has been required in recent years, the 'specialists' used gave their time freely in support of that scrutiny work e.g. on the Bootham Park Hospital review completed by the former Health & Adult Social Care Policy & Scrutiny Committee in September 2016. Similarly, this year Scrutiny Committees have taken advantage of experts such as Professor Jonathan Bradshaw from the University of York, an internationally recognised academic, who have lent their support and knowledge on issues around poverty in the city. Of course, Scrutiny also has regular dealings with organisations such as The Joseph Rowntree Foundation and has access to a wide spectrum of its data.
12. It would be fair to say that some Committees have perhaps been reluctant to take on review work so far given the increase in Scrutiny Committees and the number of meetings this Municipal Year. Equally, many Scrutiny Members were elected to the Council for the first time in May 2019, following the local elections, and are still 'finding their feet' in scrutiny and learning what makes a successful review before undertaking any. This Committee also continues to be concerned with improving engagement and focussing upon quality scrutiny aimed at achieving meaningful outcomes.

Member Training

13. 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.
14. 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.
15. Training for Scrutiny Members has not yet been provided as a part of the induction programme for newly elected Members. This is largely because the Council has been working with the Local Government Association on the delivery of its external training and it has not yet been possible to agree upon a suitable date;
16. It is planned to discuss Scrutiny Member training further at the next meeting of Chairs and Vice-Chairs of Scrutiny Committees in early December 2019, by which time it is hoped to have potential options and dates for this session.

Consultation

17. 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 budget for scrutiny.

Options

18. (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 2020/21 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

19. 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, selects and conducts its reviews could have a significant impact on how it contributes to the Council's development.

Implications

20. **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 support, where required.
21. 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

22. 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 significant efforts are made to establish appropriate use(s).

Conclusions

23. 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 spend advisably on for instance key training for Scrutiny Members/Chairs.
21. 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 the local election year. In part also due to the changing nature of the way Scrutiny Officers can undertake their own research using technology.
22. Scrutiny continues to struggle with wider engagement in terms of appropriate topics, its work and the involvement of external agencies, unless it has a very specific remit such as health or climate change. Engagement too may well have a bearing on how and if this research support budget is spent. This Committee has already identified some future work in relation to member engagement.

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 20120/21

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