

**Customer & Corporate Services Scrutiny
Management Committee**

8 February 2021

Report of the Assistant Director – Legal & Governance

Scrutiny Review Support Budget 2021/22

Summary

1. This report sets out the current position in relation to available Council funding for research in support of scrutiny review work. It has been accepted on to the agenda by the Chair as urgent business, in accordance with Section 100B(4)(b) of the Local Government Act 1972, in view of the constitutional requirement for this Committee to be consulted on the level of specific budget the Council may allocate to support scrutiny research, prior to a decision being made at Budget Council on 25 February 2021.
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 2021/22.

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 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.

Analysis

5. In this current financial year to date 2020/21, there has been no spend against this budget which, at this stage, continues to demonstrate a repeating trend and one which is unlikely to change unless and until scrutiny engagement and focus shifts towards requiring external expert participation. This year, of course, the world has been struggling with an ongoing pandemic. Certainly, there was no scrutiny activity at all during the first lockdown between March – May, when this Council, like many others, was familiarising itself with what services to provide during that period and with new remote meeting regulations. Since May 2020, there has been active scrutiny but over a remote meeting platform, with scrutiny being restricted to activities possible under the current climate.
8. Given the current scenario under which Councils and scrutiny operate, it is difficult to begin accessing what level of external research funding scrutiny might need to support its activity. 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

2017-20/21 – no spend

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, in 2019, Scrutiny Committees took advantage of experts such as Professor Jonathan Bradshaw from the University of York, an internationally recognised academic, who lent their support and knowledge on issues around poverty in the city. Of course, Scrutiny also has had regular dealings in the past on reviews with organisations such as The Joseph Rowntree Foundation with access to a wide spectrum of its data.
12. It would be fair to say that since being elected for the first time in May 2019 and a global pandemic occurring from January 2020 onwards, many newer Members to Scrutiny have still not had the opportunity to fully access what it is they want to achieve, review or improve through scrutiny. Restricted organisational resources are currently available to support scrutiny. As a result of both these factors, this Committee, as the hierarchical Committee managing the focus of scrutiny resources, continues to find new ways of striving to improve engagement and featuring on quality scrutiny aimed at achieving meaningful outcomes.

Member Training

13. In 2020 this Committee indicated it would be willing to consider allocating spend from this budget to support specific training on scrutiny should the Local Government Association (LGA) not have capacity for some

considerable time to provide its free training to scrutiny members. Clearly, that too, was hit by the Covid 19 pandemic.

Consultation

14. 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

15. (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 2021/22 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

16. 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 and/or scrutiny activity could have a significant impact on how it contributes to the Council's development.

Implications

17. **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. That is particularly notable this year, given the ongoing financially difficult circumstances this Council and others face arising from the costs associated with Covid 19. The Council is already looking to make significant savings. However, if funding continued at a comparatively low level as currently provided, then that impact would be minimal in

comparison to the potential benefits of receiving external research support, where required.

18. 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

19. 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 for the foreseeable future, given the restrictions arising from the ongoing pandemic and new ways of effecting valuable pre-decision scrutiny.

Conclusions

20. 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 funding more advisably.
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 a local election year. In part also due to the changing nature of the way scrutiny activity is developing with the recent emergency of greater organisational early pre-decision scrutiny.

Recommendations

22. 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 2021/22.

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

Contact Details

Author:

Dawn Steel
Head of Civic &
Democratic Services
Tel No. (01904) 551030

Chief Officer Responsible for the report:

Janie Berry
Director of Governance & Monitoring Officer

Report Approved **Date** 4 February 2021

Specialist Implications Officer(s)

None

All

Wards Affected:

For further information please contact the author of the report

Background Papers: None

Annexes: None