

**Customer & Corporate Services Scrutiny
Management Committee**

12 November 2018

Report of the Assistant Director – Legal & Governance

Scrutiny Review Support Budget

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 2019/20.

Background

3. For the 2010/11 financial year, this Committee decided not to recommend any change to its then existing base scrutiny support budget, which stood at £15k. The Budget Council meeting, however, in February 2011, agreed to cut that support budget, as part of the savings exercise.
4. The then Budget Council decision was taken against an understanding that there had been little spend against the scrutiny support budget for the previous 3 to 4 years. This was with the notable exception of a consultation survey undertaken in relation to a scrutiny review into traffic congestion and its impact.
5. Subsequently, at Budget Council in February 2012 and upon the recommendation of the then Scrutiny Management Committee, Council agreed to reinstate a small support budget for scrutiny research work associated with reviews, in the sum of £5k, and since that time this Committee has chosen to allocate £1k annually to each Scrutiny Committee for that purpose.
6. In making its recommendations on this budget to Budget Council last year for 2018/19, this Committee debated at length the merits of potentially

asking Council to increase this support budget to enable more outward facing scrutiny to take place. It agreed and Council endorsed to support a continuing £5k for the year but with a proviso that, if scrutiny needed, up to £10k could be allocated.

Analysis

7. In this current financial year to date 2018/19, there has been no spend against this budget which, at this stage, 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.
8. Similarly in 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. The only costs recorded therefore in
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 specialist consultants 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. Contacts at the University of York have also recently indicated that they would be happy to provide, pro-bono, independent research on key topics, should the subject matter require their support and subject to resource availability.
11. Work is continuing on overview, policy development (by the new Economy & Place Policy Development Scrutiny Committee) and on actual scrutiny reviews but none of these have needed to call upon spend against this budget head.
12. It would be fair to say that some Committees have perhaps been reluctant to take on review work given the shortage of a Scrutiny Officer for part of the current year. Equally, reviews tend to slow down during the last year before local elections, as clearly, there is a need to complete these before the end of Members' term of office.
13. Having said that, this Committee have been concerned about improving engagement with and focus upon quality scrutiny driven to achieve meaningful outcomes for some time. For that reason, it has established a Task Group reviewing these aspects with a view to seeking to improve and develop the operation of scrutiny in York. In turn, this may have a medium to long term impact on the use of this particular budget.

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 2019/20 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; and

Council Plan 2015-19

16. Whilst this report does not in itself materially affect how the work of scrutiny can support and develop the Council's overall priorities set out in the Council Plan 2015-2019, how scrutiny organises itself, selects and conducts its reviews 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. 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.
18. There are no Human Resources, Equalities, Legal, Information Technology, Crime & Disorder or other implications associated with 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 in the area concerned and any potential impact on improvements to Council performance. 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.

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 spend advisably on for instance key training for 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. In part also due to the changing nature of the way Scrutiny Officers can undertake their own research using technology.
22. Members may wish to give close consideration to these trends when making their recommendation and, notwithstanding their recommendation, to whether they wish to invite the Task Group looking at Scrutiny Operations and Engagement to give some thought to these trends as part of its work.

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 2019/20; and

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

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Report Approved **Date** 31 October 2018

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All

Wards Affected:

For further information please contact the author of the report

Background Papers: None

Annexes: None