

# OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD



Report subject	<b>Overview and Scrutiny Action Plan</b>
Meeting date	8 January 2024
Status	Public Report
Executive summary	<p>The Overview and Scrutiny Board requested an update on the progress against the Overview and Scrutiny (O&amp;S) action plan which sets out strategic actions agreed by Council to assist in improving O&amp;S within BCP Council.</p> <p>The action plan is attached at Appendix 1 and provides a detailed update on progress against actions as of December 2023.</p>
Recommendations	<p><b>It is RECOMMENDED that:</b></p> <p><b>The O&amp;S Board considers and comments on the progress made against the O&amp;S action plan.</b></p>
Reason for recommendations	<p>The O&amp;S action plan sets out actions required by BCP Council to meet the standard expectations set out in statutory guidance for O&amp;S. Monitoring progress against the O&amp;S action plan will enable councillors to understand and challenge progress being made against reaching these standards.</p> <p>Monitoring progress of the O&amp;S action plan is also in line with the responsibilities of the O&amp;S Board, as set out in the constitution, to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• oversee the Council's overall O&amp;S function including oversight of the work plans and use of resource across all O&amp;S bodies</li><li>• keep the O&amp;S function under review, suggesting changes as appropriate to ensure that it remains fit for purpose.</li></ul>

Portfolio Holder(s):	Not applicable – Overview and Scrutiny is a non-executive function.
Corporate Director	Graham Farrant – Chief Executive
Report Authors	Lindsay Marshall – Overview and Scrutiny Specialist
Wards	Council-wide
Classification	For Update

## Background and Summary

1. The Overview and Scrutiny action plan provides detail on actions identified to improve Overview and Scrutiny (O&S) activity in BCP Council and bring practices in line with statutory guidance for O&S. The action plan was agreed by Council in September 2023. This report provides an update on progress for the period of September-December 2023.
2. The action plan also addresses O&S areas for development as identified through work which responds to the 'Best Value Notice' that was issued to the Council by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities (DLUHC), in August 2023. This was in response to the completion of an external assurance review carried out by DLUHC. The findings were in line with those of the Chief Executive's internal assurance review and all improvement activity is being monitored through the BCP Council Assurance Review Action Plan. The recommendations have been welcomed in dealing with historical issues and setting a new tone for the Council.
3. Responsibility for monitoring the O&S action plan sits with the O&S Board. This responsibility was established following the changes to the O&S structure agreed by the Council in September 2023. Progress on the O&S action plan is also shared with all O&S Chairs and will be reported to all O&S committees and Council on an annual basis through the O&S Annual Report.
4. To establish improvement actions for O&S, all practices within the O&S function were assessed against the standards set out in '*Statutory Guidance on Overview and Scrutiny in Local and Combined Authorities*' (2019) in a desktop exercise undertaken by the Statutory Scrutiny Officer in Spring 2023. The guidance provides a benchmark for good working practices in O&S and is statutory, meaning that guidance should be followed unless there is a good reason not to.
5. The guidance is themed as follows:
  - Culture
  - Resourcing
  - Selecting Committee Members
  - Power to Access Information
  - Planning Work
  - Evidence Sessions

Much of the statutory guidance relates to ways of working and the Council-wide approach to O&S. The clearest message is the need for a strong organisational culture in which there is a collective ownership of the success of O&S, parity of esteem for O&S and value placed on the challenge that O&S can provide. The guidance highlights that:

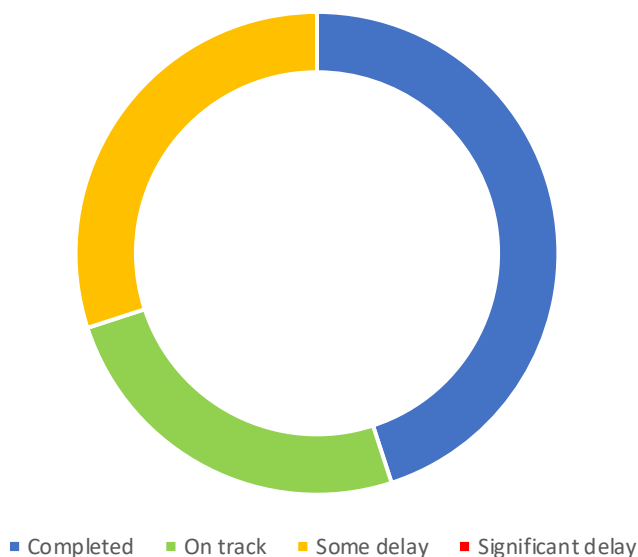
*'The prevailing organisational culture, behaviours and attitudes of an authority will largely determine whether its scrutiny function succeeds or fails'.*

6. The O&S action plan follows the themes of the guidance. All relevant paragraphs of the guidance have been included within the action plan, to aid reader's understanding of why actions have been identified, and the resulting plan for improvement is comprehensive. There are a total of **120** actions, some of which overlap. Where actions are similar (e.g., reflecting different aspects of councillor training required) they remain split into separate actions to demonstrate how these will uphold the statutory guidance. It should be noted that for this reason the action plan is highly detailed and serves as an operational tool to progress actions as well as for reporting on progress.

### Progress to date

7. The updated action plan in Appendix 1 provides a detailed update against each of the actions as of December 2023, demonstrating good progress. 45% of the actions have been completed, a 16% increase since September 2023. 25% of the actions are on target to complete as planned, 30% have experienced some delay to the expected completion date and 0% have experienced significant delay. Of those experiencing some delay to completion, 56% are in progress.

### Progress against actions



8. Improvement actions identified within the plan were set over a period of one year for completion. Councillors should note that this timeframe is ambitious and progress has been, and will continue to be, impacted upon by other O&S activity taking place concurrently. In September 2023 the Council reviewed the O&S committee structure and officers have been diverted to supporting the successful

implementation of resulting changes. O&S meetings were increased and in 2024 are expected to be 23% above the resources available to support this work, excluding any special meetings that may also be requested through the year. A bid for additional officer resource to support O&S has been made, to ensure that the function can be effectively supported. Pending the outcome of this bid, O&S activity above resource levels available will continue to impact on the progression of the action plan. Where resources are diverted to other O&S activity, strategic work set out in the action plan will be reprioritised appropriately.

9. Of the actions scheduled for completion by December 2023 the highest priority actions were those relating to the induction of new O&S councillors, building an O&S skills and knowledge base among those councillors and establishing work programmes for O&S committees. A comprehensive councillor induction programme was delivered for which feedback was positive and further training opportunities for O&S councillors have been set up, including LGA offered support and leadership training to support O&S Chairs. The Council's revision of the O&S committee structure impacted upon the timeliness of O&S work programming activity and the resource available to support this work, however all O&S work programming is now on track to complete in February 2024.
10. The O&S action plan addresses recommendations raised through the Assurance Review activity as detailed in paragraph two above. There have been strides made in addressing these actions, with O&S Committees now diversifying working methods to undertake more policy development work with Cabinet scrutiny being less dominant across all committees. All committees show evidence of working more collectively as a scrutiny team with an independent mindset, and meetings are less adversarial than prior to the May local elections. Evidence is taken from officers along with portfolio holders to inform scrutiny. Committees are taking a more active role in performance management, close monitoring of the financial situation of the council and monitoring progress against the transformation programme and Assurance Review Action Plan. Officers are actively supporting these approaches and will monitor this on an ongoing basis.
11. There are encouraging signs that the organisational culture, behaviours and attitudes towards O&S are developing in a positive direction. Attendance from portfolio holders at O&S meetings is good. Effective informal relationships are developing well between O&S members and senior officers and portfolio holders. This is an essential mechanism for ensuring that O&S can understand the priorities of the Council and direct its resources most effectively. The Council's Corporate Management Board has agreed to regularly review workplans for O&S and there is a good commitment from the Leader of the council and senior officers to supporting scrutiny activity. Officers supporting O&S will continue to encourage the development of these relationships. Actions identified around training for officers on O&S will assist in embedding a sound understanding of the purpose of O&S across the organisation and the role it plays in strong effective governance.

## **Options Appraisal**

12. An options appraisal is not required for this update report.

### **Summary of financial implications**

13. There are no direct financial implications arising from this report but councillors should note comments built into this report and the action plan regarding resources available to support O&S. Additional O&S activity was agreed by Council in September 2023 when the O&S committee structure was reviewed. The implications of resourcing this change were set out to Council within the accompanying report and a request for appropriate staffing budget to support an increase in O&S activity is currently in the determination stage through annual budget setting processes.
14. Direct officer support to O&S is split between core functions (the servicing of meetings and production of minutes and agendas); proactive support to assist councillors in the planning of effective scrutiny sessions and strategic improvements across the scrutiny function. Where resources are stretched, they must be directed to core function support to ensure statutory requirements are met. This will affect the pace of progress against the O&S action plan.

### **Summary of legal implications**

15. There are no direct legal implications arising from this report. Overview and Scrutiny is a statutory function of all councils operating an executive model of decision making. Improvements to the function, outlined in the report, will ensure that the work of O&S Committees in BCP Council complies with relevant legislation, upholds statutory guidance and contributes to good governance within the Council.

### **Summary of human resources implications**

16. There are no direct human resource implications arising from this report.

### **Summary of sustainability impact**

17. There are no direct sustainability impacts arising from this report.

### **Summary of public health implications**

18. There are no direct public health implications arising from this report.

### **Summary of equality implications**

19. This update report does not require an equality impact assessment.

### **Summary of risk assessment**

20. The improvements identified for O&S, as set out in the O&S action plan, will ensure that statutory guidance is upheld. There is a risk that the guidance will not be properly upheld by the Council if actions identified are not taken or progressed in a timely way.

### **Background papers**

Published works:

[Statutory Guidance on Overview and Scrutiny in Local and Combined Authorities](#)

[Assurance Review Action Plan](#)

## **Appendices**

Appendix 1 – Overview and Scrutiny Action Plan 2023-24